

***AL-TAFSĪR BI AL-ŞŪRA: VISUAL
EXEGESIS AND THE QUR'ĀNIC-IMAGE
NEXUS IN THE PERSIAN ILLUSTRATED
MANUSCRIPT OF IŞĤAQ IBN IBRĀHĪM
AL-NISHĀPŪRĪ'S QIŞAŞ AL-'ANBIYĀ'*
(MS. 18576 BRITISH LIBRARY)**

A Thesis

**Submitted to the Master's Study Program of Islamic Studies at the
Faculty of Islamic Studies in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of**

Master of Arts (M.A.)



by:

Muhammad Nuril Fauzan

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UNIVERSITAS ISLAM INTERNASIONAL INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

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The integration of exegesis and art is not a recent development; the incorporation of Qur'ānic discourse into artistic forms has long been practiced, particularly during the Islamic dynastic periods. One notable manifestation of this is the emergence of illustrated manuscripts in the Persian world, in which classical Qur'ānic stories were adapted into richly illuminated texts containing Qur'ānic verses, narrative prose, and visual depictions. This study investigates the historical moment and conditions under which *Qiṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'* became visually illustrated, the extent of integration among verse, narrative, and image, and the degree to which illustrations may operate as *tafsīr* or exegetical agents. To address these questions, the study adopts a qualitative approach by combining semiotic and linguistic analysis in examining al-Nīshāpūrī's *Qiṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'* (Add Ms. 18576), with a specific limitation on Ibrāhīm's attempted sacrifice of Ismā'il's narrative. It draws on Tzvetan Todorov's narrative theory and Roland Barthes's two-order semiotics, while also incorporating supplementary frameworks such as W.J.T. Mitchell's theory of images as quasi-objects and Kress and van Leeuwen's model of information value (Given and New). The findings suggest that the genre of illustrated *Qiṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'* manuscripts began to flourish and be mass-produced during the 16th century, following a long and multifaceted process of development. Within these manuscripts, the internal integration of Qur'ānic verses, prose narratives, and illustrations reveals a coherent structural and semantic relationship. Illustrations, in particular, are shown to function not merely as decorative elements but as visual exegetes, interpreting and expanding upon Qur'ānic narratives. They operate both alongside textual narratives and in the absence of Qur'ānic verses, filling exegetical silences and serving as anchoring devices that convey theological and narrative meaning.

Keywords: *Islamic Art, Illustrated Manuscript, Qiṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā', Qur'ān, Tafsīr*

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INTRODUCTION

In her introduction to the colloquium series publication *Word of God, Art of Men*, Fahmida Suleiman argues that the Qur’ān—traditionally associated with oral recitation and governed by the sciences of *qirā’āt* and *tajwīd* (i.e., reading technique)—has evolved into a medium through which Muslims express their faith and devotion through visual artistic forms.¹ Through different ways, such as calligraphy, manuscript illumination, and architectural ornamentation, the Qur’ān has become a vital source of aesthetic inspiration. Oleg Grabar (2007) articulates this relationship in three dimensions: the reception of the Qur’ān within society, the Qur’ān’s contribution to artistic expression, and the development of a Qur’ānic hermeneutics of the arts.² Thus, the Qur’ān assumes a dynamic role, not only as a sacred literary text but also as an aesthetic object that informs and enriches Muslim societies’ visual and material culture.

Since it was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad over 1,400 years ago, the Qur’ān has inspired a long-standing tradition of artistic engagement, particularly within manuscript culture. Among the many historical manifestations of this tradition, illustrated manuscripts exemplify a sophisticated interplay between sacred narrative, visual imagery, and exegetical intent. These manuscripts do not merely preserve stories; they reinterpret them through image and layout, offering early models of what might be termed visual exegesis, especially when Qur’ānic narratives or verses were used. Although more than a millennium has passed, the impulse to visually engage with the Qur’ān has not diminished, but has even evolved. In the 21st century, a distinctive phenomenon has emerged wherein the Qur’ān, particularly its interpretation, is increasingly reimagined through illustrative media. Contemporary visual interpretations, while shaped by modern aesthetic sensibilities and pedagogical aims, reflect a lineage that can be traced back

¹ Fahmida Suleiman, ed., *Word of God, Art of Man: The Qur’an and Its Creative Expressions: Selected Proceedings from the International Colloquium, London, 18-21 October 2003*, Qur’anic Studies Series 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2007), 1.

² Oleg Grabar, “The Qur’an as a Source of Artistic Inspiration,” in *Word of God, Art of Man: The Qur’an and Its Creative Expressions Selected Proceedings from the International Colloquium, London, 18-21 October 2003*, ed. Fahmida Suleiman, Qur’anic Studies Series 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2007), 37–38.

to works like illustrated manuscripts, underscoring the enduring power of images to illuminate sacred narratives.

This practice, often referred to as “visual *tafsīr*” or “*tafsīr* in pictures”, involves rendering Qur’ānic interpretations visually, typically aimed at young audiences.³ Scholars observing this trend often focus on illustrated commentaries of *Juz’ ‘Ammā* (i.e., the final section of the Qur’ān), which are simplified and contextualized for contemporary pedagogical use. The production of such works involves collaborative processes among the authors (i.e., interpreters)—frequently lay *mufasssirs*⁴—illustrators, and publishers. Each actor shapes the horizon of Qur’ānic reception, resulting in a dynamic interplay between sacred text, interpretation, and visual representation.

In addition, the period has witnessed a significant rise in the use of illustration within popular Islamic literature. This is particularly evident in the proliferation of comic books and illustrated storybooks that depict classical Qur’ānic narratives for educational and pedagogical purposes. Among the most prominent genres are the stories of the 25 Prophets and Messengers, which are widely consumed by Muslim communities across the globe. In Indonesia, for instance, the popularity of such literature is reflected in the diverse range and high sales volume of these books on major e-commerce platforms, indicating strong public demand and cultural resonance.

The widespread circulation of such literature underscores the importance of accessible Qur’ānic knowledge, particularly for younger or non-specialist audiences. Within the Qur’ān, the stories of the Prophets and Messengers occupy a central thematic role, frequently repeated across various chapters and verses. For example, the narrative of Moses (Mūsā), a paradigmatic prophetic figure, is

³ Johanna Pink, *Muslim Qur’ānic Interpretation Today: Media, Genealogies and Interpretive Communities*, Themes in Qur’ānic Studies (Bristol: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2018), 95; Nafisatuz Zahro’, “Tafsir Visual: Kajian Resepsi atas Tafsir dan Ilustrasi dalam Tafsir Juz ‘Ammā for Kids,” *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-ilmu Al-Qur’an dan Hadis* 16, no. 1 (March 16, 2017): 126–27.

⁴ In Zahro’s writing, she references the author of *Tafsir Juz ‘Ammā*, Abdul Mustaqim, as a *mufasssir* (i.e., Qur’ānic interpreter). However, if other similar works are examined, the author is sometimes not from the group that received strong training in Islamic science. For this reason, Görke, in his writing, defines them as lay *mufasssirs*. Andreas Görke and Johanna Pink, eds., *Tafsīr and Islamic Intellectual History: Exploring the Boundaries of a Genre*, Qur’anic Studies Series 12 (London: The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2014), 361–67.

mentioned over one hundred times in different verses.⁵ The figure of 25 Prophets and Messengers, also widely recognized in Islamic tradition, corresponds to those whose names are explicitly mentioned in the Qur’ān. As such, the stories of the Prophets serve as foundational material in classical Qur’ānic storytelling and are often selected for adaptation into visual or popular media due to their narrative richness and theological significance.

This study is guided by a central research question: To what extent did pre-modern Islamic illustrated manuscripts, such as *Qīṣaṣ al-‘Anbiyā’*, serve as visual exegetical texts, thereby providing a historical precedent for image-based interpretations of the Qur’ān? In other words, can parallels be drawn between contemporary visual *tafsīr* and earlier artistic approaches that integrated the Qur’ān with visual media, although it is embedded in a partially *tafsīr* product? Such inquiries may be explored through the rich tradition of illustrated Islamic manuscripts, which flourished in various dynasties, particularly in the Persianate cultural sphere. During these periods, miniature painting became a prominent artistic practice, often embedded in manuscripts that engaged with religious, historical, and didactic themes. Many of these works were commissioned by royal courts or high-ranking patrons, reflecting a dynamic intersection of artistic expression and textual tradition.⁶ However, once it is established that illustrated manuscripts offer a valuable historical precedent, a more focused question arises: Which specific manuscripts best exemplify this phenomenon of visualized Qur’ānic narratives or interpretations? Identifying such examples is essential for tracing the genealogies of visual *tafsīr* and understanding how earlier Islamic societies engaged with the Qur’ān through visual means.

The intersection of text and image—where scripture meets visual representation—offers a compelling lens into Islamic societies’ devotional, pedagogical, and artistic culture. Among the most revealing examples of this synthesis are illustrated manuscripts recounting the stories of the Prophets and early

⁵ According to Fu’ād ‘Abd al-Bāqī, the word Mūsā [موسى] is mentioned 135 times in the Qur’ān. al-Bāqī Muḥammad Fu’ād ‘Abd, *al-Mu’jam al-Mufaḥras li Alfāz al-Qur’ān al-Karīm* (Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 1998), 280–82.

⁶ David J. Roxburgh, “The Study of Painting and the Arts of the Book,” *Muqarnas Online* 17, no. 1 (2000): 1–16.

communities in 16th-century Safavid. This is a notable trend, mainly because from as early as the 13th century, miniature paintings occasionally included depictions of the Prophet Muhammad himself, suggesting the possibility of broader visual engagement with prophetic narratives during this period and the period after.⁷ One of those is the illustrated manuscript of *Qiṣaṣ al-‘Anbiyā’* by Ishāq ibn Ibrāhīm al-Nishāpūrī, which stands not only as a narrative text but also as a multimodal text, in which textual and visual layers are intricately intertwined to convey theological meaning. Qur’ānic verses are often seamlessly integrated into the prose, serving as structural anchors and indicators of divine authority and spiritual significance. The accompanying illustrations, meanwhile, operate as a visual hermeneutic, enabling readers to engage with episodes of prophetic history imaginatively. These images, which depict miracles, divine interventions, and moral trials, do not function independently but are embedded within a religious semiotic system that guides interpretation and reception. In this sense, the manuscript offers more than aesthetic pleasure; it becomes a didactic and devotional space, inviting viewers to contemplate the sacred history of the Qur’ān through a visually enriched interpretive lens.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While there is a substantial body of work addressing the Qur’ān in relation to art, most of these studies concentrate on calligraphy, illumination, and architectural inscriptions, rather than exploring the Qur’ān’s interpretation through narrative illustration.

One of the most comprehensive contributions to this field is the volume *Word of God, Art of Man*, which examines how the Qur’ān has been visually and materially engaged through art and architecture.⁸ The chapters present a wide range of approaches, including the use of Qur’ānic inscriptions in buildings, coinage, woodcarving, and *kiswah* (the Ka’ba cover). It also addresses the magical and

⁷ Gruber (2018) argues that figural representation of Muhammad largely emanated from Persian and Turkish lands (13th to 18th century). She adds that prior to that, the representational images had been produced, but, due to the Mongol invasion, any evidence to that must have been destroyed. Christiane Gruber, *The Praiseworthy One: The Prophet Muhammad in Islamic Texts and Images* (Bloomington (Ind.): Indiana University Press, 2018), 13.

⁸ Suleman, *Word of God, Art of Man*.

apotropaic uses of Qur'ānic text on objects such as amulets and talismans. Yet, despite its breadth, the volume does not venture into the realm of illustrative narrative representations of Qur'ānic content.

The intersection between Qur'ānic studies and visual art has been further developed within the broader field of Islamic art history. However, as Fahmida Suleiman, the editor of *Word of God, Art of Man*, points out, this focus has been largely dominated by manuscript illumination and calligraphy, particularly since the World of Islam Festival in 1976, which significantly increased Western interest in the aesthetic dimensions of the Qur'ān.⁹ In this sense, scholars such as Sheila Blair have produced foundational studies in this area, with her two works representing. Her 1998 book *Islamic Inscriptions* explores the significance of textual inscriptions—including Qur'ānic verses—across various media, while *Islamic Calligraphy* (2006) offers a detailed analysis of the development of Qur'ānic script across Safavid, Mughal, and Ottoman contexts, including some modern adaptations.¹⁰

Further references in major academic compendia, such as the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*¹¹, *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*¹², and *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*¹³—include entries on Qur'ānic art, architecture, and material culture. While these works offer critical insights into the aesthetic and devotional functions of Qur'ānic inscriptions, they similarly lack substantive engagement with illustrative practices in relation to *tafsīr*. As such, visual interpretation as a form of exegetical practice remains an under-theorised area within the broader landscape of Islamic visual culture.

The tendency to connect *tafsīr* with art and illustration has thus just been shown in the modern period. Although in an explicit manner, several studies have addressed visual components within exegetical works, such as in the case of

⁹ Ibid., 4.

¹⁰ Sheila S. Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy* (Edinburgh University Press, 2008); Sheila S. Blair, *Islamic Inscriptions* (Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

¹¹ Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

¹² Andrew Rippin, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006).

¹³ Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Ṭaṇṭāwī Jawharī's [d. 1940] *al-Jawāhir fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*. Known for its rational and scientific orientation, this *tafsīr* includes numerous scientific illustrations and tables, particularly in relation to *āyāt al-kauniyyah* (i.e., cosmological verses). Scholars such as Siti Rahmah and Bashori (2025) have noted that these visual additions aim to enhance interactivity and appeal, particularly for younger, visually-oriented readers.¹⁴ Likewise, prior to that of Rahmah's and Bashori's, Majid Daneshgar's (2018) extensive work points out that Ṭaṇṭāwī incorporated illustrations and scientific reports as part of his effort to rationalize Qur'ānic content.¹⁵ However, such visual elements are typically treated as ancillary features, and their function as a visual mode of exegesis remains insufficiently explored.

The most explicit recent contribution to the discourse on visual *tafsīr* comes from Zahro (2017), who introduced the term "Visual Tafsir" in her study of Abdul Mustaqim's *Tafsīr Juz 'Amma*. She highlights the collaborative process between the book's author and illustrator and argues that the book denotes the reception process between those two.¹⁶ In a similar vein, Johanna Pink (2019) discusses "Tafsir in Pictures" in her analysis of the exact text, reflecting growing interest in how Qur'ānic interpretation is mediated visually in children's literature.¹⁷ The work of Pink (2019) seems to delineate the modern approach toward *tafsīr* and shows how illustration acted as a means of interpreting Qur'ān. However, such studies as demonstrated by Zahro (2017) and Pink (2019) remain limited to contemporary products and seldom engage with classical Islamic literature.

To fill this gap, this study turns to illustrated manuscripts, especially those that integrate Qur'ānic narratives with visual elements. Although no known traditional *tafsīr* work was directly rendered into an illustrated manuscript, a related genre, narratives of the 25 Prophets and Messengers, can serve as a representative corpus for visual *tafsīr*. This is justifiable, as the identification of these 25 figures

¹⁴ Siti Rahmah and Bashori, "Kajian Kitab Tafsir Al-Jawahir Karya Imam Tantawi Jauhari," *At-Taklim: Jurnal Pendidikan Multidisiplin* 2, no. 1 (January 14, 2025): 208.

¹⁵ Majid Daneshgar, *Ṭaṇṭāwī Jawharī and the Qur'ān: Tafsīr and Social Concerns in the Twentieth Century* (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 112.

¹⁶ Zahro, "Tafsir Visual: Kajian Resepsi atas Tafsir dan Ilustrasi dalam Tafsir Juz 'Amma for Kids."

¹⁷ Pink, *Muslim Qur'ānic Interpretation Today*, 95.

is derived explicitly from the Qur'ān, forming a canonical foundation of prophetic belief in Islam. Consequently, illustrated manuscripts focusing on prophetic stories, such as *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'*, can be considered a form of exegetical production, visually mediating Qur'ānic content and thus functioning as interpretive texts in their own right. Among these, *Qiṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'* by Ishāq ibn Ibrāhīm al-Nishāpūrī offers a particularly rich case.

Despite the flourishing of pictorial Islamic texts—especially in Persian and Ottoman contexts—specific studies of *Qiṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'* manuscripts remain rare. Much existing scholarship focuses instead on depictions of the Prophet Muhammad, such as works of Christiane Gruber. In 2009, she wrote about three different forms of representations of the Prophet Muhammad that appear in Persian Pictorial Manuscripts. She sought to describe the representations of the Prophet Muhammad, the evolution of these depictions over the centuries, and potential reasons for the transition from 'veristic' representations (thirteenth to eighteenth centuries) to abstract techniques (sixteenth to nineteenth centuries).¹⁸ In the course of this development, three main theories of representation were formulated in this regard, mainly veristic, inscriptional, and *kalima* (luminous). Her research was further refined ten years later, when she published *The Praiseworthy One*, an extensive book that examines how the Prophet Muhammad was portrayed throughout the Islamic dynastic period.¹⁹ While this touches on the Prophet Muhammad's representation and story, it can be argued that there is a dearth of studies that address the creative process of illustration and its integration with Qur'ānic verses, particularly on the Prophet's Story, which is a narrative that draws heavily from the Qur'ān.

The most comprehensive study of *Qiṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'* illustrations is *Stories of the Prophets: Illustrated Manuscripts of Qiṣas al-'Anbiyā'* by Rachel Milstein, Karin Ruhrdanz, and Barbara Schmitz (2000). This work analyses 21 Persian *Qiṣaṣ* manuscripts from the late 16th century, offering both textual and iconographic

¹⁸ Christiane Gruber, "Between Logos (Kalima) and Light (Nūr): Representations of the Prophet Muhammad in Islamic Painting," in *Muqarnas*, Volume 26, ed. Gülru Necipoglu and Karen Leal (BRILL, 2009), 229–62.

¹⁹ Gruber, *The Praiseworthy One*.

readings.²⁰ Yet, even here, the integration of Qur'ānic citation with visual storytelling is not treated as a central object of analysis. This leaves room for further inquiry into how Qur'ānic verses and illustrations interact in the visual construction of prophetic history, both in terms of interpretive strategy and reception.

Thereby, despite the growing academic interest in visual *tafsīr* today and illustrated manuscripts, a key question remains: how did illustrated manuscripts, such as those attributed to al-Nishāpūrī, integrate visual representation with Qur'ānic storytelling? This project addresses that gap by reexamining *Qīṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'* manuscripts as early examples of visual *tafsīr*, foregrounding the role of illustration as a medium of Qur'ānic interpretation in pre-modern Islamic visual culture. That is to say, it works not only as a literary production but also as a visual-exegetical corpus.

This work addresses a critical gap in the scholarship of art, Qur'ān, and its *tafsīr*. It examines how the integration of Qur'ānic verse with works of art is reflected in the classical illustrated manuscript of the stories of the Prophets (*Qīṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'*) by Ishāq ibn Ibrāhīm al-Nishāpūrī. It further problematizes how visual illustrations of classical Qur'ānic narratives have the potential and ability to become a medium of Qur'ānic interpretation, which, in general, is usually concentrated and revolves around textual analysis. Three primary questions are formulated: Firstly, how did the genre *Qīṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'* and the illustrated manuscript tradition start to be associated with each other? Second, how does the integration between Qur'ānic verses and illustrations occur in the illustrated manuscript of al-Nishāpūrī's *Qīṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'*? How does the illustration in the manuscript function as a medium of visual interpretation of the Qur'ānic verses it accompanies? In what ways do the illustrations serve as hermeneutical agents of Qur'ānic interpretation within al-Nishāpūrī's *Qīṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'*, particularly in the case of foundational prophetic narratives such as that of Ibrāhīm?

This study argues that the illustrations in the *Qīṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'* illustrated manuscript can function as exegetical agents of the Qur'ān, either through direct or

²⁰ Rachel Milstein, Karin Rühdanz, and Barbara Schmitz, *Stories of the Prophets: Illustrated Manuscripts of Qīṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'* (California: Mazda Publishers, 1999).

indirect integration. In the former, the illustrations visually interpret verses that are explicitly cited within the text, providing immediate pictorial explanations. In the latter, even in the absence of direct Qur'ānic citations, the illustrations serve as semantic anchorages that visually elaborate and interpret classical Qur'ānic narratives, thus filling exegetical gaps and extending meaning beyond the written word.

METHODS

To address the three central research questions, this study adopts a qualitative approach, specifically employing a visual hermeneutic method grounded in semiotic and linguistic studies to examine how the Persian illustrated manuscript *Qiṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'* by Ishāq ibn Ibrāhīm al-Nishāpūrī serves as a medium of Qur'ānic interpretation. The primary source for this research is British Library Manuscript Add Ms. 18576, composed in Persian and rich with visual depictions of prophetic narratives. This manuscript was chosen because it represents illustrated manuscripts produced outside of royal or imperial court commissions. It is also selected due to its accessibility and unique integration of Qur'ānic verses within the illustrated narrative of *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'*. As one of the few surviving examples of this genre, the manuscript offers a compelling case for analyzing the exegetical role of images through a focused, in-depth approach. While broader comparative analysis is valuable, a single-manuscript study enables a more nuanced engagement with visual hermeneutics, addressing a gap in current scholarship that often overlooks the interpretive potential of illustration in premodern Islamic texts. This study also focuses on one key prophetic story as its representative, Ibrāhīm, with his narrative of the sacrifice of his son, selected to limit its scope. The story is chosen for its significant narrative weight and the illustrative emphasis placed on pivotal moments in his life, especially in the sense that Ibrāhīm played a crucial role in the history of Islam, including his being referred to as the father of the prophets.

Rather than approaching the text purely through philology or the images solely through art history, this research is positioned at the intersection of Islamic manuscript studies, visual culture, and semiotic analysis, with attention to the combination of the theoretical contribution of the “Two Orders semiotics” of

Roland Barthes (2006) in examining visual signs from Ibrāhīm's attempted sacrifice of Ismā'īl's illustration in Ms. 18576. This primary framework provides a critical lens through which the two core research questions are addressed. This theory is sound, particularly in determining the signs from which the illustration is examined. His framework consists of denotation and connotation. Denotation refers to the literal, explicit meaning of a sign, while connotation refers to the cultural, emotional, or ideological associations associated with that sign, adding layers of interpretation beyond the literal. He also introduces myth, a broader cultural narrative that reinforces dominant ideologies, which is created within the connotation level.²¹ Within this study, the framework aids in analyzing the literal and implied meanings in the illustration, which helps construct the meaning of the illustration as a visual exegete.

This study also employs Todorov's (1971) narrative theory as a complementary tool, referring to the theory of examining any narrative form in five formal elements: equilibrium, disruption, recognition, resolution, and new equilibrium.²² This theory complements the analysis of Ibrāhīm's narrative, prior to the examination of its illustration, as it operates as a heuristic device to trace the narrative trajectory of that Ibrāhīm story. It divides the story into distinct sequences, indicating where the integration between the narrative text, Qur'ānic verses, and the illustration occurs. While Todorov's structuralist model was developed for Western narrative forms, its five-phase framework offers a valuable lens to parse Qur'ānic narrative structures within visual manuscripts.

In this study, two additional theoretical tools, Kress and van Leeuwen's concept of Information Value and W.J.T. Mitchell's (2005) notion of Pictures as Quasi-Objects, are employed to complement the previous analytical frameworks. These frameworks are functional not merely as tools of visual analysis but also as epistemological lenses that help to reveal how meaning is constructed and transmitted through visual culture within the Islamic tradition. The former, Kress and van Leeuwen's (2008) Information Value of "Given and New", is particularly relevant in the context of Islamic manuscript layout, where the composition and

²¹ Roland Barthes and Annette Lavers, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006).

²² Tzvetan Todorov, "The 2 Principles of Narrative," *Diacritics* 1, no. 1 (1971): 37.

spatial arrangement of Qur'ānic verses, narrative text, and illustrations are not arbitrary but deliberate and meaningful.²³ In the right-to-left reading tradition of Persian manuscripts, what is placed on the right (i.e., Given) often represents what is known, expected, or foundational, while the left (i.e., New) introduces new interpretations or visual elaborations. Thereby, this framework enables the interpretation of layout and positioning as hermeneutic choices rather than decorative design elements.

The latter, W.J.T. Mitchell's (2005) theory of pictures as quasi-objects, is instrumental in advancing the argument that illustrations in this *Qiṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'* (Ms. 18576) can function as visual exegetes. Mitchell (2005) challenges the Cartesian division between active subjects (i.e., texts, authors) and passive objects (i.e., images), arguing instead that images may act, persuade, or even "speak."²⁴ When applied to Islamic illustrated manuscripts, this view aligns with the idea that images participate in the epistemological process of understanding the Qur'ānic narrative. In contexts where the Qur'ānic verse is absent or minimal, the illustration can fill the exegetical silence, providing interpretive substance that is not merely representational but semiotically charged. This reflects the Islamic tradition's rich history of non-discursive forms of knowledge transmission—through architecture, calligraphy, and miniature painting—where seeing becomes a mode of knowing. Together, these frameworks support the view that *Qiṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'*, especially the Ms. 18576, is not simply a narrative retelling of prophetic stories but a multimodal exegetical object. Its visual and textual components interact in hermeneutically deliberate and epistemologically significant ways, revealing a distinctive form of Islamic visual epistemology, where meaning is read, seen, felt, and experienced through the image.

In doing so, this study begins by contextualizing the genre of *Qiṣaṣ* and its relationship to the illustrated manuscript tradition, followed by an introduction to the manuscript and its attributed author. After that, it analyzes the presentation of the manuscript, especially how each component integrates with the others. In

²³ Gunther R. Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, 2. ed., repr (London: Routledge, 2008), 179–85.

²⁴ W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

addition, it unpacks visual signs from the illustration and continues with a final analysis of its functions within this manuscript. This is to identify that they can operate as a conveyor of interpretation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF *QIṢAṢ AL-‘ANBIYĀ’* ILLUSTRATED MANUSCRIPT: THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN ITS TRADITION, GENRE, AND ISLAMIC ART

In the vast history of Islamic manuscripts, one recurring theme that has attracted scholarly attention is the relationship between text and image, particularly through the integration of visual and artistic elements within manuscripts, most notably in the form of illustrated or illuminated works. The term illustrated manuscript generally refers to a handwritten book produced before the invention of print, containing visual embellishments that range from decorative motifs to detailed figural representations. In particular, illuminated manuscripts are characterized by the use of gold and silver leaf, which, when combined with vibrant pigments, create a luminous, shimmering effect on the page.²⁵

In the Islamic context, the phrase “Islamic illuminated manuscript” denotes manuscripts produced in Islamic lands and under Islamic cultural influence, enriched with characteristic artistic conventions, including calligraphy, arabesques, geometric patterns, and sometimes figural illustrations. Over time, however, a semantic distinction has developed between the terms illustrated and illuminated. While “illuminated” traditionally refers to non-figural embellishments, particularly those involving precious metals and ornamental borders, “illustrated” has come to denote the inclusion of miniature paintings or figural scenes on the manuscript pages. Despite this distinction, the two terms are often used interchangeably in contemporary discourse, particularly in relation to Islamic art, where illuminated manuscripts frequently feature both decorative and narrative illustrations.

According to Jonathan Bloom (2000), scholars have long maintained that the tradition of illustrated manuscripts has deep roots in the Islamic world, despite the

²⁵ Richard Hayman, *Illuminated Manuscripts* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2017), 5.

scarcity of surviving early examples.²⁶ This perspective is echoed by Hoffman (2000), who notes that the origins of illustrated books in Islamic lands are marked by ambiguity and uncertainty, making their earliest developments difficult to trace.²⁷ Nevertheless, available evidence suggests that some of the earliest illustrated manuscripts emerged in the Arab world, positioning Arabia as a formative center in the development of Islamic manuscript culture. Scholars, like Ben Snelders, even suggest that the first known instance of manuscript illustration occurred in the context of Qur’ānic studies, where early Qur’ān manuscripts were adorned with decorative illumination, thus forming what is now considered the illuminated Qur’ān manuscript tradition.²⁸ This period also coincided with the Graeco-Arabic translation movement, which contributed to the intellectual and artistic flourishing that informed manuscript production in early Islamic history.

Another important contribution comes from Rice (1959), who identifies the earliest surviving illustrated Arabic manuscript as dating from the 11th century, namely ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sūfī’s *Treatise of the Stars (Kitāb Ṣuwār al-Kawākib al-Thābita)*. In this kind of work, illustrations serve as tools to aid comprehension, ranging from diagrammatic sketches with minimal artistic intent to fully developed figural representations.²⁹ The latter, or figural illustration, is particularly significant for the current study, as it provides a precedent for the visual representation of narrative and symbolic content within Islamic manuscript traditions, including the stories of the Prophets.³⁰

²⁶ Jonathan M. Bloom, “The Introduction of Paper to the Islamic Lands and the Development of the Illustrated Manuscript,” *Muqarnas Online* 17, no. 1 (2000): 17.

²⁷ Eva R. Hoffman, “The Beginnings of the Illustrated Arabic Book: An Intersection Between Art and Scholarship,” *Muqarnas Online* 17, no. 1 (2000): 37.

²⁸ Bas Snelders, *Identity and Christian-Muslim Interaction: Medieval Art of the Syrian Orthodox from the Mosul Area* (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 3.

²⁹ D. S. Rice, “The Oldest Illustrated Arabic Manuscript,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 22, no. 2 (1959): 15.

³⁰ Further arguments about the antiquity of Islamic illustrated manuscripts suggest even earlier origins. One such claim points to a fragmentary manuscript found in Egypt, possibly dating from the 9th or early 10th century, containing a rudimentary drawing of two tombs and a tree. Even more speculative are references found in textual sources. For example, al-Mas‘ūdī (10th century) mentions a Sasanian manuscript dated to 731 CE, reportedly containing 27 portraits painted in gold, silver, and copper on purple parchment. Likewise, Ibn al-Muqaffa’s 8th-century Arabic translation of *Kalīla wa Dimna* explicitly refers to illustrations intended to “delight and educate” the reader—an early articulation of visual pedagogy, though no extant illustrated versions from his time survive. While these accounts are valuable, they remain inconclusive. Thus, the cautious stance of Bloom and Hoffman, who emphasize the uncertainty surrounding the earliest stages of Islamic manuscript

From the discussion of early Arabic illustrated manuscripts, one might assume that their artistic style constitutes what is often referred to as Arabic painting—a term applied to manuscript illustration rooted in Arabic cultural and linguistic contexts. Some scholars have posited that Arabic painting served as a precursor to Persian miniature painting, suggesting a linear development. However, this view is challenged by Oleg Grabar (2019), who critiques such claims as products of problematic historiographical constructs. Grabar argues that treating Arabic painting as merely an early phase in the evolution toward Persian miniature reflects a flawed, “Darwinian” model of artistic development.³¹ Instead, he proposes that the distinction between Arabic and Persian painting should be understood through their differing social, cultural, and patronage frameworks, rather than as stages in a single trajectory of Islamic art.³²

Periodically speaking, Bloom (2000) notes that the tradition of illustrated manuscripts in the Islamic world witnessed a significant surge in production between the late 12th and early 14th centuries.³³ He observes that scholars attribute this flourishing to a variety of factors, including developments in paper production, the expansion of scholarly and artistic patronage, and the growing demand for scientific, literary, and religious texts that were both informative and visually engaging. These periods, if traced further, are periods when Persian Islamic dynasties transformed and developed over time. They range particularly from the Ilkhanid era in the 13th century to Safavid Iran in the 16th century, marking significant phases in the evolution of Persian Islamic dynasties and their manuscript traditions.

During this time, various discursive themes were adapted into illustrated manuscripts, especially within the distinctive styles of Persian miniature painting. Among these, the *Qiṣaṣ al-‘Anbiyā’* (Stories of the Prophets) genre—though

illustration, remains the most academically tenable position. Hoffman, “The Beginnings of the Illustrated Arabic Book: An Intersection Between Art and Scholarship”; Rice, “The Oldest Illustrated Arabic Manuscript”; Bloom, “The Introduction of Paper to the Islamic Lands and the Development of the Illustrated Manuscript.”

³¹ Oleg Grabar, “What Does ‘Arab Painting’ Mean?,” in *Arab Painting: Text and Image in Illustrated Arabic Manuscripts*, 2nd ed. (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2010), 17–22.

³² Ibid.

³³ Bloom, “The Introduction of Paper to the Islamic Lands and the Development of the Illustrated Manuscript,” 17.

comparatively marginal—was nonetheless represented. As Grabar notes, this theme held a relatively small place in manuscript illustration when compared to more popular genres such as Persian hagiography (e.g., *Shāhnāme*) or texts on divination and pilgrimage sites.³⁴ To understand how *Qiṣaṣ al-‘Anbiyā’* interacted with visual culture, one must first trace its development into a distinct genre. On this point, Milstein provides a helpful overview of how *Qiṣaṣ* emerged as a literary tradition that eventually acquired a status independent from both Qur’ānic exegesis and classical *tafsīr*.

Qiṣaṣ al-‘Anbiyā’, before its engagement with visual culture, had already emerged as a didactic genre within Islamic literature. Closely tied to the Qur’ān, it shares significant affinities with Qur’ānic exegesis, particularly in its historiographical function of compiling comprehensive narratives about prophetic figures, and often incorporates narration of *isrā’iliyyāt*³⁵ (i.e., tradition inspired by Jewish and Christian scriptural sources). As Hagen (2009) notes, *tafsīr* and historiography often overlap in their attempt to elaborate on the lives of the prophets.³⁶ In this light, *Qiṣaṣ al-‘Anbiyā’* may be viewed as a form of mythic narrative, functioning as a symbolic translation of the Qur’ān into a language accessible to the “mythic mind,” a framework that renders sacred history intelligible through narrative imagination.³⁷ The rise of this genre also contributed to the early translation movement of the Qur’ān in Persian lands.³⁸

The earliest known compilation of *Qiṣaṣ al-Qur’ān* is attributed to Wahb ibn Munabbih [d. 730], a Persian figure recognised as a *tābi‘īn* and a prominent transmitter of *Isrā’iliyyāt* traditions.³⁹ His narratives significantly shaped later

³⁴ Grabar, “What Does ‘Arab Painting’ Mean?”; Rachel Milstein, “Islam, Art, and Depictions of Prophets,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, by Rachel Milstein (Oxford University Press, 2019), 5.

³⁵ For more information, see: Reuven Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis* (Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 1990).

³⁶ Gottfried Hagen, “From Haggadic Exegesis to Myth: Popular Stories of the Prophets in Islam,” in *Sacred Tropes: Tanakh, New Testament, and Qur’an as Literature and Culture* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2009), 303.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 306.

³⁸ Travis Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qur’an: Translation and the Rise of Persian Exegesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

³⁹ This narrative approach, also known as the Haggadic approach, inspired a tradition of Islamic historiography that began to present biblical and prophetic figures within a more structured

works, particularly the version attributed to al-Kisā'ī, whose *Qīṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'* expanded upon similar themes and was widely circulated. Parallel to this tradition, Ibn Hishām's [d. 883] 9th-century *Sīrah Nabawiyyah*, an edited version of Ibn Ishāq's earlier work, established a literary framework that integrated the Prophet Muhammad into a continuous line of prophetic history. This work became foundational for later biographical and historical narratives, linking the Prophet's life with the broader Qur'ānic and prophetic tradition.

Al-Kisā'ī's *Qīṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'* later served as a model for the genre in subsequent anthologies. By the 9th century, *qīṣaṣ* narratives had begun to receive increasing scholarly attention and were recognized as a distinct genre within Islamic literature.⁴⁰ Two centuries later, the genre reached a peak, exemplified by the comprehensive work of al-Tha'labī [d. 1035].⁴¹ Notably, both al-Kisā'ī and al-Tha'labī [d. 1035] structured their narratives according to biblical chronology rather than the Qur'ānic order. This is partly due to the Qur'ān's non-linear narrative structure, which often requires the reader to actively reconstruct events across dispersed verses. Despite their shared structure, the stylistic differences between the two authors are significant. These variations reflect a broader transition from the oral tradition of storytelling to the more scholarly and textual culture of the '*ulamā'*'.⁴²

As the production of illustrated manuscripts surged within this period, the intersection between the *Qīṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'* genre and visual manuscript culture

and linear historical framework. The most prominent example of this genre is al-Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*, which will be further discussed in relation to the adoption of prophetic narratives into the illustrated manuscript tradition. R. G. Khoury, "Wahb b. Munabbih" (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, n.d.); Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qur'an*, 253–54.

⁴⁰ Andrew Rippin, *The Qur'an: Formative Interpretation*, The Formation of the Classical Islamic World Ser (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 1999), 316; Cornelia Schöck, *Adam Im Islam* (Berlin: Klaus-Schwarz-Verlag GmbH, 2021); Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Kisā'ī, *Tales of the Prophets: Qīṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'*, trans. Thackston Jr. and Wheeler M. (Chicago: Great Books of the Islamic World; KAZI Publications, 1997).

⁴¹ According to Roberto Tottoli and Rachel Milstein, al-Tha'labī's collection is considered to be one of the most thorough and widely circulated compilations of prophetic stories within the Arab Islamic tradition. Roberto Tottoli, "The Qisas Al-Anbiyā' Of Ibn Mutarrif Al-Tarafī (D. 454/1062): Stories of the Prophets from Al-Andalus," *Al-Qantara* 19, no. 1 (1998): 133; Roberto Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'an and Muslim Literature* (London New York: Routledge, 2011); Milstein, Rührdanz, and Schmitz, *Stories of the Prophets: Illustrated Manuscripts of Qīṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'*, 9.

⁴² Milstein, Rührdanz, and Schmitz, *Stories of the Prophets: Illustrated Manuscripts of Qīṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'*; Milstein, "Islam, Art, and Depictions of Prophets."

began to emerge, though with notable limitations. Despite its close ties to Qur'ānic and exegetical discourse, the *qiṣaṣ* genre remained somewhat marginal in the canon of Islamic manuscript illustration. Its visual adaptation did not initially center on complete prophetic biographies; rather, elements of prophetic stories were integrated into broader historical works.

During the Ilkhanid period in the 14th century, as Bloom (2000) notes, the production of illustrated manuscripts experienced a significant increase, particularly in the genre of the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, which would later become Iran's national epic. Alongside these epic narratives, other forms of literature also flourished under Ilkhanid patronage, including universal histories such as the aforementioned al-Ṭabarī's [d. 923] *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk* (often in the Persian translation by Bal'amī [d. 997], Rashīd al-Dīn's [d. 1318] *Jāmi' al-Tawārīkh*, and compilations of scientific and folkloric knowledge such as al-Bīrūnī's [d. 1048] *Chronologies of Ancient Nations*. Stories of the prophets were often incorporated within these works, and in some cases, figural representations of prophets—including Muḥammad and 'Alī—began to be showcased, reflecting both the influence of courtly patronage and the stylistic cross-pollination fostered by cultural exchange. Rashīd al-Dīn [d. 1318] in particular is known to have commissioned a wide range of illustrators, and prophetic figures frequently appear in his manuscripts as divine messengers, reinforcing their religious and political significance.

In the subsequent Timurid period, following the decline of the Ilkhanid dynasty, Persian literary culture witnessed a renewed emphasis on romance and poetic expression. While the illustrated manuscript tradition persisted, it continued to draw heavily from Ilkhanid models, particularly in visual style and thematic structure. Fragments of Rashīd al-Dīn's [d. 1318] historical works remained influential, though they were often incomplete. Notably, Ḥāfiẓ-i Abrū [d. 1430] undertook efforts to revise, complete, and adapt these earlier texts, reflecting the Timurid court's investment in both preserving and reinterpreting Ilkhanid intellectual and artistic legacies.

The tradition of illustrated Islamic manuscripts reached its zenith under three major dynasties: the Safavid, Mughal, and Ottoman empires. This flourishing began

in the 16th century, widely regarded as the golden age of Persian illustrated literature.⁴³ Each dynasty developed distinct manuscript cultures, including works that depicted prophetic narratives. In Safavid Iran, the production of illustrated manuscripts started to be intensified in the mid-16th century, notably with two lavishly illustrated volumes commissioned for a Safavid prince and executed by leading court artists. One of these was the *Haft Awrang*, a celebrated work of Persian poetic literature. Another significant manuscript from this period is the *Fal-Nāma* (*Book of Omens*), a divinatory text that presents prophetic stories in biblical sequence, alongside additional narratives such as those concerning ‘Alī, reflecting both religious symbolism and esoteric cosmology.⁴⁴

Following the surge in illustrated manuscript production under Shah Tahmasp,⁴⁵ many *Qiṣaṣ al-‘Anbiyā’* texts were adapted into illustrated form in the period between 1565 and 1585.⁴⁶ This is also influenced by the fact that Shah Ṭahmāsp’s deepening religious orthodoxy and personal interest in prophetic stories, dreams, and divination encouraged the production of manuscripts with moral and eschatological themes. Notably, works by al-Nishapūrī, al-Juwayrī, and al-Daydūzamī served as the primary textual sources for these visual manuscripts. Interestingly, al-Nishapūrī’s text—believed to have originated as early as the eleventh century—was frequently adapted into illustrated manuscripts in later periods, particularly the sixteenth century.⁴⁷ A comparison between the earliest

⁴³ Hagen, “From Haggadic Exegesis to Myth: Popular Stories of the Prophets in Islam,” 304–5; Milstein, “Islam, Art, and Depictions of Prophets,” 7.

⁴⁴ The comparison done by Milstein et al. shows that the illustrations in *Fal-Nama* might have influenced the artistic style in the subsequent *Qiṣaṣ al-‘Anbiyā’* illustrated manuscripts. Milstein, Rührdanz, and Schmitz, *Stories of the Prophets: Illustrated Manuscripts of Qiṣaṣ al-‘Anbiyā’*, 66–69.

⁴⁵ Shah Tahmasp, the second ruler of the Safavid dynasty, was initially a devoted patron of the arts and played a pivotal role in shaping the visual culture of his era. His reign is marked by the production of the *Shahnameh* of Shah Tahmasp, a monumental illustrated manuscript that transformed Ferdowsi’s epic—originally composed during the Samanid period—into the most lavishly illustrated version of the *Shahnameh* ever produced. The manuscript comprises 759 folios, 258 of which contain miniature paintings, reflecting both artistic ambition and dynastic prestige. As royal patronage for illustrated manuscripts flourished under Tahmasp, other literary and religious genres likewise saw increased production, particularly within court workshops and elite commissions. Andrew J. Newman, *Safavid Iran: Rebirth of A Persian Empire* (London New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 33–35.

⁴⁶ Milstein, Rührdanz, and Schmitz, *Stories of the Prophets: Illustrated Manuscripts of Qiṣaṣ al-‘Anbiyā’*, 65–69.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 10–11.

extant manuscripts of al-Nishapūrī and sixteenth-century illustrated versions reveals substantial textual consistency, with only occasional alterations such as revised endings or minor narrative modifications.⁴⁸ The text attributed to al-Juwayrī, whose lithographed version was analyzed by Storey (2021), likely dates back to the tenth century.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, al-Daydūzamī, most likely active in sixteenth-century Qazvin, appears to have composed his text in the context of Safavid manuscript patronage.

Although these texts emerged from diverse theological and social milieus, by the Safavid period, they were often merged and adapted within single illustrated codices to align with the ideological and visual preferences of courtly patrons. These illustrated manuscripts were typically produced in royal workshops (*kitābkhāna*), and it was not uncommon for the textual content to be modified to complement a predetermined cycle of images. This practice suggests that rather than merely replicating classical narratives, Safavid illustrated manuscripts actively reshaped prophetic stories, embedding them in new visual and ideological frameworks tailored to the era's political and religious currents.

A similar genre of illustrated manuscript emerged in the Ottoman Empire between the 16th and 17th centuries, though with a different production context—namely, for commercial circulation rather than elite patronage.⁵⁰ These works often featured parallel versions authored by figures such as those three mentioned earlier. Their texts, composed in a popular and didactic style, narrated the virtuous deeds of the prophets and other sacred figures, ranging from Adam to ‘Alī, thereby serving both devotional and instructional functions for a broader readership.

During the same period, the Ottoman Empire produced a parallel tradition of prophet depictions that blended political legitimacy with pious narrative. Ottoman versions of *Qiṣaṣ al-‘Anbiyā’*, created between the 1570s and 1580s, were richly illustrated and often featured prophets as forefathers of the sultans, integrating

⁴⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁹ This dating of al-Juwayrī's *Qiṣaṣ al-‘Anbiyā’* is likely to be inaccurate. This is because, according to Milstein et al., its date (i.e., 352) was chosen by an anonymous forger merely because the date correlates with the instruction of Ṭabārī's translation. C. A. Storey, *Persian Literature: A Bio-Bibliographical Survey* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2021); Milstein, Rührdanz, and Schmitz, *Stories of the Prophets: Illustrated Manuscripts of Qiṣaṣ al-‘Anbiyā’*, 11.

⁵⁰ Milstein, “Islam, Art, and Depictions of Prophets.”

biblical figures into dynastic ideology. This is evident in royal productions such as the *Şāhnāme-i Āl-i ‘Osmān*, where sultans like Suleiman the Magnificent were portrayed in the image of King Solomon, reinforcing the sultan’s claim to religious and political authority.⁵¹ Later albums, such as *Zubdat al-tawārīkh*, presented a visual chronology of prophets from Adam onward, often depicted in Ottoman garb to assert the empire’s spiritual continuity with sacred history. In Ottoman Baghdad, influenced by Sufi circles, emotionally charged depictions emerged in texts like Fudulī’s *Hadīqat al-Su‘adā’* and Kashifi’s *Rawḍat al-shuhadā’*, portraying the suffering of ‘Alī’s family with theatrical realism reminiscent of *ta’ziya* rituals. Meanwhile, in Mughal India, prophetic imagery was largely absent except for Christian figures like Jesus, drawn from European models, with rare exceptions like a Western-style Noah’s Ark. These regional variations underscore how prophetic imagery served diverse functions—spiritual, political, and devotional—across Islamic empires.

Taking everything into account, the process in which the genre of *Qışaş al-‘Anbiyā’* intersects with the tradition of Islamic illustrated manuscripts occurred mostly in the 16th century, with its patronage being influenced by the mass production of illustrated manuscripts that range from various themes. From this also, it is observable that the intersection of this genre with the manuscript tradition reflects a broader trend in Islamic art, which, although frequently concerned with artistic production, simultaneously functions as a form of reception.⁵² The creation of illustrated manuscripts, particularly those that engage with Qur’ānic narratives, constitutes a process of meaning-making and interpretation undertaken by various agents, including the manuscript maker, painter, calligrapher, and patron. Their visual and material choices reveal aesthetic intentions and theological and exegetical perspectives. As such, the production of these works can be understood as a form of *tafsīr bi al-ṣūrah* (visual exegesis), in which classical Qur’ānic stories are interpreted, reimagined, and transmitted through image.

⁵¹ Ibid., 8; Esin Atıl, *Süleymanname: The Illustrated History of Süleyman the Magnificent* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1986).

⁵² Wendy M. K. Shaw, *What Is “Islamic” Art? Between Religion and Perception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 2.

The subsequent section provides a discussion about one of these manuscripts that dates from around the period mentioned above. It briefly introduces the manuscript under examination and its attributed author within this tradition.

ABOUT THE MANUSCRIPT AND ITS ATTRIBUTED AUTHOR

The manuscript under examination, Add MS 18576, is a copy of *Qiṣaṣ al-ʿAnbiyāʾ* attributed to Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm b. Maṣṣūr b. Khalaf al-Nishapūrī. According to the British Library, it is one of fourteen known illustrated manuscripts of this text produced in Safavid Iran during the late 16th century.⁵³ This aligns with earlier discussions, noting that the illustration of prophetic narratives gained momentum during this period, an artistic surge, dated by Milstein, between 1565 and 1585. Thus, it can be argued that the dating of this illustrated manuscript is significantly later than the life of its original author. As Milstein (2000) notes, citing C.A. Storey, al-Nīshāpūrī likely did not live beyond the fifth century Hijri (late 11th century CE).⁵⁴ This view is supported by Habib Yaghmaʿī, the modern editor of the Nīshāpūrī text, who describes it as probably the earliest and most compelling Persian version of the *Qiṣaṣ al-ʿAnbiyāʾ*. Milstein further observes that al-Nīshāpūrī's composition appears to postdate and be influenced by the combined Balʿamī–Ṭabarī historical tradition, situating his work roughly a generation after Ṭabarī.⁵⁵

Little is known about the personal life of al-Nīshāpūrī. The only biographical detail that can be inferred with some certainty is his nisba, which suggests that he lived in Nishapur—a major city in the Khorasan region that, during his time, was a significant center of Islamic intellectual and spiritual activity.⁵⁶ In several illustrated manuscripts based on his *Qiṣaṣ al-ʿAnbiyāʾ*, there are narrative elements that some scholars, such as al-Ṭahrānī, have interpreted as indicative of a Shīʿī orientation.

⁵³ However, the number that Milstein examines reveals a different outcome, showing the possibility of more production of this kind of manuscript. Milstein, Rühdanz, and Schmitz, *Stories of the Prophets: Illustrated Manuscripts of Qiṣaṣ al-ʿAnbiyāʾ*; “Stories of the Prophets: An Illustrated Persian Manuscript by Nishapuri,” accessed July 2, 2025, <https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2022/08/stories-of-the-prophets-an-illustrated-persian-manuscript-by-nishapuri.html>.

⁵⁴ Storey, *Persian Literature*, 159–60; Milstein, Rühdanz, and Schmitz, *Stories of the Prophets: Illustrated Manuscripts of Qiṣaṣ al-ʿAnbiyāʾ*, 10.

⁵⁵ Milstein, Rühdanz, and Schmitz, *Stories of the Prophets: Illustrated Manuscripts of Qiṣaṣ al-ʿAnbiyāʾ*, 10.

⁵⁶ Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qurʾan*, 30.

One such example is the inclusion of the story of al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf and his persecution of ‘Alī’s followers during the Umayyad period. However, this view is complicated by the presence of stories in the same manuscript that portray the political legacy of all four Rāshidūn caliphs following the final Prophet. This juxtaposition complicates efforts to assign a definitive sectarian affiliation to al-Nīshāpūrī himself. It may be more accurate to view these illustrated manuscripts, especially as they were reproduced in the 15th and 16th centuries, as shaped by the artistic and spiritual priorities of their later patrons, rather than as direct reflections of the author’s own theological position.

This particular manuscript, housed in the British Library, comprises 165 out of an original 229 folios, each measuring approximately 35.5 x 23.5 cm.⁵⁷ The writing area typically spans 19.5 x 13 cm or 21 x 12.5 cm. The text is executed in nasta’līq⁵⁸ script, with each folio containing approximately 15 to 17 lines of text, attributed to at least two different anonymous calligraphers. The manuscript is written in Old Persian, with a deliberate chromatic hierarchy: black ink for the main body of the text, blue for section headings, and gold and red for Qur’ānic verses.

Content-wise, the manuscript covers a wide range of narratives, from the story of Ādam to that of the Prophet Muhammad, with additional accounts of key historical figures such as the caliphs, ‘Abbās, and Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf, suggesting later additions during the manuscript’s illustrated production phase. Despite the extensive narrative content, the number of visual depictions is relatively limited. The manuscript features thirteen illustrations, including: First, the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise; Second, the crow teaching Qābil how to bury Hābil about burial ritual; Third, Nūḥ (Noah) aboard his great ark; Fourth, the prophet Hūd, and the punishment of the people of ‘Ād; Fifth, Ibrāhīm about to sacrifice his son Ismā‘īl; Sixth, Yūsuf (Joseph) being sold in Egypt; Seventh, Jonah (Yūnus) coming out of the belly of the giant fish; Eighth, Ayyūb recovering from his illness; Ninth, Dawūd (David) fighting Jālūt (Goliath) and his people; Tenth, Dhū al-Qarnain (Alexander the Great) building a wall to keep out the people from Ya‘jūj and Ma‘jūj

⁵⁷ The extent of the preserved folios is clarified in the note at the end of the manuscript.

⁵⁸ Nasta’līq is a style of calligraphy that is uniquely associated with the Persianate world and regarded as the Persian equivalent to the Arabic naskh, particularly in its role as a refined visual embodiment of poetic elegance and linguistic subtlety. Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*.

(Gog-Magog); Eleventh, Zakariyyā (Zacharias) being told about the birth of Yaḥyā (John the Baptist); Twelfth, ‘Alī breaking into fortress of Khaibar; Thirteenth; An Endpiece, showing a literary party in a garden.

This manuscript is also notable as one of the few illustrated copies of *Qışaş al-Anbiyā*’ that exclusively adopts what Rachel Milstein classifies as the third illustrative style. This style is marked by the use of horizontal registers, simplified architectural motifs, large and standardized figures, and an overall flat compositional approach.⁵⁹ Such features point to a workshop-based model geared toward commercial production rather than elite or royal patronage. The variable quality across the images suggests the involvement of multiple artists, possibly including both master painters and apprentices. Moreover, several illustrations exhibit characteristics reminiscent of the previously mentioned *Fal-Nāma* style. Milstein further argues that the dispersed Persian *Fal-Nāma* manuscripts played a crucial role in shaping the iconographic and miniature traditions later found in *Qışaş al-Anbiyā*’. This is evident in the first twelve miniatures observed in this style, which are also preserved in the final version of the manuscript.⁶⁰

Moreover, stylistic comparisons situate this manuscript within a core group of *Qışaş al-‘Anbiyā*’ texts that may have been produced in Istanbul. This attribution is grounded in the presence of multiple illustrative styles coexisting within a relatively short timeframe, as well as the recurrence of shared artistic features across manuscripts in this group. At the time, Istanbul, as the capital of the Ottoman Empire, offered a uniquely cosmopolitan artistic environment. While there was a growing demand for Persian-language manuscripts, especially those influenced by Safavid aesthetics, Istanbul lacked a dominant indigenous miniature tradition. This absence of a rigid local visual canon permitted greater artistic experimentation, enabling a diverse group of painters and calligraphers to create manuscripts that both referenced Persian models and responded to the evolving visual economy of the Ottoman court and commercial sphere.

⁵⁹ Milstein, Rührdanz, and Schmitz, *Stories of the Prophets: Illustrated Manuscripts of Qışaş al-‘Anbiyā*’, 48–51.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 70.

Unfortunately, while it is difficult to trace the history of the attributed author, or al-Nishāpūrī, the same applies to the history of this manuscript. The British Library, the official keeper of this manuscript, even states that little is known of the former history of this beautiful copy. One particular detail that can be inferred is that the manuscript was acquired from Sotheby's auction on 13 March 1851, where it was listed in the sale catalogue as "the property of a gentleman leaving England," and noted as part of a broader collection of books connected with the fine arts.⁶¹

NARRATIVE STRUCTURING AND INTEGRATION OF TEXTUAL-VISUAL COMPOSITION IN THE STORY OF IBRĀHĪM WITHIN AL-NISHĀPŪRĪ'S *QIṢAṢ AL-'ANBIYĀ'* (MS. 18576)

This section presents a focused analysis of the integration between Qur'ānic verse quotations and illustrations in the illustrated al-Nishāpūrī's *Qīṣaṣ al-‘Anbiyā’* manuscript, specifically in the episode of Prophet Ibrāhīm's attempted sacrifice of his son, indicating the way in which this manuscript retells the Prophet stories and the verses within. This integration extends beyond decorative or didactic purposes; it constitutes a complex visual-narrative system in which text and image collaborate to convey theological meaning. To explore this dynamic, the analysis is structured around two key aspects: (1) the narrative and Qur'ānic structure, and (2) the formal modes of integration.

The Narrative Structure

In the illustrated *Qīṣaṣ al-‘Anbiyā’* manuscript, the integration of Qur'ānic verses with the narrative prose reveals a selective interweaving of scripture within the broader storytelling framework. Qur'ānic quotations are embedded sparingly and do not encompass the entire narrative arc. Instead, the theological and narrative weight is distributed across textual narration and visual representation. This selective integration is especially evident in the sacrificial episode, where only three verses are cited in this manuscript. These include: Ibrāhīm [14]:37, 39, and al-Ṣaffāt [37]:102.

⁶¹ "Stories of the Prophets."

Before delving into the integrated forms of Qur’ānic text and image, it is crucial first to outline this episode’s narrative structure in this manuscript. For this purpose, Tzvetan Todorov’s (1971) narrative theory offers a useful framework for examining Ismā’īl’s sacrificial plot. His model divides a story into five distinct stages: (1) equilibrium, (2) disruption, (3) recognition, (4) repair, and (5) new equilibrium.⁶² This structure helps to map the narrative sequence of the sacrifice story as rendered in the manuscript, particularly in relation to how Qur’ānic verses are quoted at key narrative moments. The flow of analysis will follow this structure to demonstrate the layered interaction between text, scripture, and image, as simplified by this table.

No	Todorov’s Stage	Narrative Scene of Ibrāhīm’s attempted sacrifice of his son
1	Equilibrium	A harmony, a graceful life of Ibrahim from the birth of his two sons (Q. 14: 39, 14: 37)
2	Disruption	An order of slaughtering Ismā’īl (Q. 37: 102)
3	Recognition	The dialogue between father and son (Q. 37: 102)
4	Repair	A substitution of Ismā’īl with a ram
5	New Equilibrium	Spiritual reflection

Table 1 Ibrāhīm’s story of sacrificing his son in Todorov’s Narrative theory

First, Equilibrium (Initial balance). The story begins with a state of relative harmony in the life of Prophet Ibrāhīm, who is depicted as grateful by the information of the birth of his sons, Ismā’īl and Ishāq. At this stage, the narrative does not yet introduce the familial or emotional trials that will later emerge. This narrative equilibrium is reinforced by the quotation of Q. 14:39: *“Praise be to Allah, who has granted me in old age Ishmael and Isaac. Indeed, my Lord is the Hearer of Supplication.”* The verse marks a moment

⁶² Todorov, “The 2 Principles of Narrative,” 39.

of divine blessing and fulfilled longing, situating Ibrāhīm's fatherhood as a tranquil reward for his piety and endurance. Another verse is also cited nearly after the first, stressing the contextual circumstance about the previous hardship that Ibrāhīm's family has been through. Q. 14: 37 is quoted: "*O our Lord, indeed I have placed some of my descendants in a valley where there is no vegetation (and it is) beside Your honoured house (Baitullāh)...*" At this point, the narrative sets the stage for the coming disruption by affirming both the stability of his household after numerous hardships and the sacredness of his relationship with his sons.

Second, Disruption (Disorder or Imbalance). The narrative equilibrium is disrupted with the birth of a long-awaited child, an event that introduces both divine fulfilment and the seeds of impending trial. Ibrahim was instructed to sacrifice his son, Ismail, in his dream. This turning point is also dramatized through the intrusion of Iblīs, who seeks to obstruct Ibrāhīm's vow to God by sowing doubt and hesitation. The manuscript recounts how Iblīs approaches Ibrāhīm, his wife, and their son in succession, attempting to dissuade each from fulfilling the divine command. This moment of disruption is scripturally anchored in Q. 37:102, which narrates the dream-command and the profound submission of both father and son: "*Then, when he reached the age to work with him, [Ibrāhīm] said, 'O my son, indeed I have seen in a dream that I [must] sacrifice you, so see what you think...'*"

This marks the transition from familial blessing to spiritual testing. As is to say, this stage reorients the narrative from peace to trial, initiating the sacrificial episode that will redefine the nature of obedience, fatherhood, and divine trust in the story.

Third, Recognition (Awareness of Error or Inequality). The stage of recognition emerges as Ibrāhīm prepares to fulfil the divine command revealed to him in a dream—an oath that now takes corporeal form. As he journeys with his son toward the appointed place of sacrifice, Ibrāhīm discloses the vision to Ismā'īl and seeks his response. It is the moment in which the disclosure and dialogue occurred. This dialogue is central to both

the emotional gravity and theological depth of the narrative. The manuscript details how Ismā‘īl, rather than resisting, fully embraces the divine decree. He not only encourages his father to act swiftly but also requests that he be bound hand and leg, and his face turned away, so that paternal affection does not obstruct the act of obedience. This profound submission is underpinned by Q. 37:102, where the Qur’ān portrays the mutual consent and steadfastness of both father and son: *“O my father, do as you are commanded. You will find me, if Allah wills, among the steadfast.”*

This stage thus encapsulates a dual recognition: Ibrāhīm recognises the seriousness of the divine command, while Ismā‘īl recognises his own role in fulfilling a divine test. It is a convergence of faith, submission, and shared spiritual insight, portrayed not as tragedy, but as a sacred encounter with divine will.

Fourth, Repair (Efforts to Improve Inequality). The repair stage unfolds in the climax of the narrative, at the moment when Ibrāhīm, fully prepared to execute the divine command, attempts to sacrifice his son. The manuscript illustrates this intense moment with striking visual and textual symbolism. As Ibrāhīm places the blade upon Ismā‘īl’s neck, the knife miraculously folds, refusing to cut. This defiance of natural order represents not failure, but divine intervention. Despite multiple attempts, the act cannot be completed, highlighting that the purpose of the test lies not in the act itself, but in the intention and submission behind it.

At this critical juncture, Ibrāhīm hears a voice from the heavens commanding him to look upward. The divine voice signifies the turning point—the divine satisfaction with both Ibrāhīm’s and Ismā‘īl’s obedience. Here, the divine replacement of Ismā‘īl with a ram marks the moment of repair, re-establishing cosmic and moral order. The test is complete; Ibrāhīm’s loyalty to the divine command has been proven, and the act of slaughter becomes symbolic, rather than literal. This substitution shifts the focus from sacrifice to submission, from bloodshed to mercy.

Fifth, New Equilibrium. The final stage re-establishes harmony, not by returning to the previous state, but by instituting a new divine order. As Ibrāhīm lifts his gaze to the heavens in responding to the celestial voice, he beholds the angel Jibrīl descending with a ram. This moment is charged with theological and symbolic meaning. The appearance of Jibrīl, the messenger of revelation, confirms that the trial has reached its divine conclusion: the test of faith has been fulfilled, not through the act of slaughter, but through the complete submission of both father and son. In this new equilibrium, Ibrāhīm is no longer just a prophet tested by God, but becomes a model of *ḥanīf* piety, whose actions define obedience, submission, and divine favour. This restoration of balance is not just personal but universal, reinforcing Ibrāhīm's role in the Abrahamic tradition as the archetype of unwavering faith.

Todorov's narrative theory reveals how the narrative structure built about the story of Ibrāhīm in this manuscript has a narrative with a complete flow and structure, from the first stage to the final stage, with some even strengthened by the appearance of Qur'ānic verses, including the former three stages (i.e., equilibrium, disruption, and recognition). However, the final stages of Todorov's model, repair and new equilibrium, are vividly absent from direct Qur'ānic citation within the manuscript. These missing verses and their implications will be explored more in the next section.

Modes of Integration

In this manuscript, the integration manifests in several ways. First is positional correlation, which concerns the spatial arrangement and proximity of Qur'ānic verses, narrative prose, and corresponding illustrations within the manuscript folios. Second is the interpretive function, in which the quoted verses serve a specific exegetical role—anchoring key theological moments or providing divine legitimation within the unfolding narrative. Third is the layout emphasis, which considers how the visual placement and typographic differentiation of Qur'ānic verses and illustrations within the text block draw the reader's attention and guide interpretive engagement. Together, these structural integrations demonstrate a layered interplay between textual authority and visual storytelling.

In terms of positional correlation, the placement of Qur'ānic verses, narrative prose, and illustrations in this manuscript does not follow a linear or sequential structure leading directly to the image. Instead, the verse citations are dispersed across distinct spatial and temporal segments of the manuscript, creating a layered and non-contiguous narrative framework. For instance, Q. 14:39, which conveys a prayer of gratitude by Ibrahim for the birth of his sons Ismā'īl and Ishāq, appears at the very beginning of the episode recounting the near-sacrifice. Its placement serves not merely as narrative exposition, but also as a semantic preamble, marking the equilibrium phase of the story and framing the subsequent dramatic events within a theocentric discourse of divine grace and gratitude. In doing so, the verse orients the reader to interpret the sacrifice not as an isolated act of violence but as part of a broader divine plan underscored by piety and submission. This pattern reflects a broader Islamic literary convention in which narratives often begin with expressions of gratitude.

The subsequent verse, Q. 14:37, appears mid-page shortly after the first, though not arranged in chronological order. Its content, which references the surrender of Ibrāhīm's progeny in a barren valley (*wād gair dhī dhar'*), functions more as a spatial and theological cue than as a sequential narrative continuation. It serves to signal the emergence of disruption within the story's structure, foreshadowing the forthcoming divine test.

It is only two folios later that Q. 37:102, the verse narrating the divine command to sacrifice the son, appears, marking the central moment of narrative tension. Thus, the accompanying illustration of the attempted slaughter does not immediately follow the verse but is deferred by yet another two pages. This affective and temporal delay between verse and image strategically cultivates narrative suspense, heightening the emotional gravity of the scene. Such compositional choices also demonstrate that the manuscript's structure eschews linear storytelling in favour of a semantic and expository arrangement, where Qur'ānic verses serve as scattered

theological anchorage⁶³, and the illustrations emerge as visual climaxes that fulfil, rather than mirror, the narrative flow. The deliberate distancing of image from text thus creates a rhythm of tension and resolution, where meaning is cumulatively constructed through the interplay of textual and visual registers, rather than spatial proximity alone.

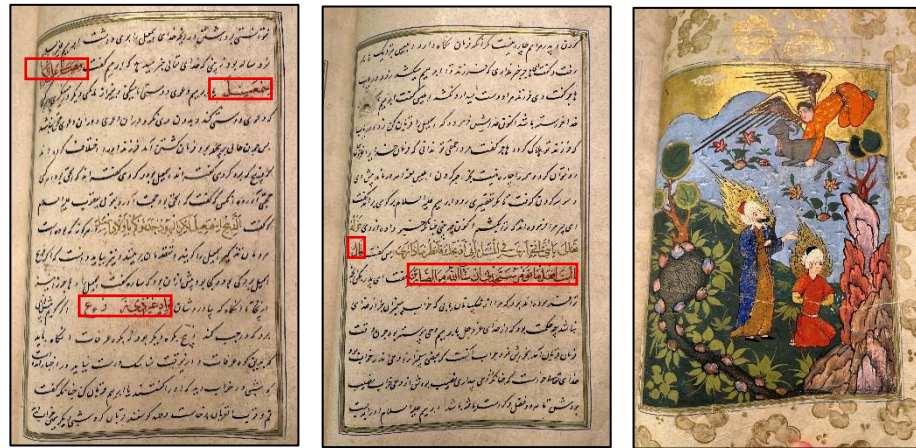


Figure 1 Structural and semantic Integration between Qur'anic verses, narrative prose, and illustration.

From left to right: the first two Qur'anic verses at the beginning of the story are put in the same folio together, the third Qur'anic verse is put two folios after the previous verses, and the illustration at the climax of the story (two folios after the third verse).

From this analysis, it is apparent that Qur'anic verses in this manuscript also serve as interpretive markers within the narrative structure, or in the previously Barthesian words “anchors.” As previously outlined in the application of Todorov's narrative theory, the verses are present and active across the first three stages (i.e., equilibrium, disruption, and recognition) while notably absent from the latter two stages, repair and new equilibrium. This selective inclusion suggests that the Qur'anic citations are not used merely to recount events, but rather to function as interpretative (semantic) anchors, denoting textual elements that guide and structure the reader's understanding of key theological or symbolic moments.⁶⁴

⁶³ Anchorage refers to the function of verbal text in directing or constraining the interpretation of an image. In this context, “verbal text” denotes written or spoken language that serves to clarify, specify, or frame the meaning of accompanying visual elements Roland Barthes and Stephen Heath, *Image, Music, Text: Essays* (London: Fontana, 1977).

⁶⁴ This is reinforced by the analysis of the shape and colour of the font of Qur'anic verses. Qur'anic verses that are included are usually in red/gold colour, with a font that is different from other texts (others usually use nasta'liq). It shows that there is emphasis and prominence of the attributes of the cited verse, as well as an indication that it is an anchorage.

However, the absence of Qur'ānic verses in these final two stages of Todorov's narrative model raises questions regarding the manuscript's exegetical completeness. It suggests either a deliberate omission or the possibility that the commentary or verse citation, which narrates the substitution of Ismā'īl with a ram, is simply missing from the surviving folios. These unwritten verses are probably Q. 37: 103 to 111, as the content and meaning of the verses are similar to the substitution event.

In the absence of these key verses, the narrative burden shifts from scriptural citation to prose elaboration and visual representation. The theological resolution, that is, the substitution of Ismā'īl with the ram and divine approval of Ibrāhīm's obedience, is thus constructed textually through expanded narrative prose and visually reinforced through miniature illustration. This substitution of Qur'ānic textual authority with iconographic and narrative elaboration reflects a broader strategy within the manuscript, whereby images and storytelling compensate for scriptural silence, preserving theological meaning through non-verbal cues and sequential exposition. In doing so, the manuscript crafts a visual-exegetical resolution to a moment that would otherwise remain hermeneutically open.

Another significant factor in analysing the integration of Qur'ānic text and image is the spatial placement of the illustration within the manuscript. In the episode of Prophet Ibrāhīm's attempted sacrifice, the only illustration appears two folios after the citation of Q. 37:102, the pivotal verse commanding the sacrifice. Briefly speaking, the image depicts the substitution of Ismā'īl with a ram, serving as a visual climax within the narrative arc. Notably, this illustration disrupts the flow of text, asserting its semantic authority and guiding the reader's engagement through visual emphasis. It is strategically placed on the right-hand side of the bifolio, a position traditionally associated with visual prominence in Islamic codicology, while the left-hand side remains textually dense, dominated by narrative prose. This layout asymmetry not only amplifies the dramatic moment but also foregrounds the role of image as a complementary exegetical

device, bridging the interpretive gap left by the absence of further verse citations.

In Kress and van Leeuwen's (2008) framework, this spatial arrangement constitutes a meaningful compositional structure. He argues that the placement of visual elements on the left or right of a page carries distinct communicative implications, shaping how viewers interpret content. While van Leeuwen's original "Given–New" model is rooted in left-to-right reading conventions typical of Latin-based scripts, in Persian manuscripts, which are read from right to left, this structure is effectively reversed. In the manuscript under analysis, the illustration appears on the right-hand page as the initial point of visual entry while the narrative text follows on the left, forming an Eastern version of the Given–New relationship. In this context, the illustration operates as the "Given": a pre-established visual prompt that invites interpretive engagement. The textual narrative, appearing subsequently, becomes the "New": a discursive elaboration that interprets or clarifies the image's theological and narrative significance.⁶⁵

This configuration highlights a crucial dynamic in Islamic manuscript culture: illustrations are not merely ornamental or ancillary, but serve as semantic agents that precede and shape the reader's understanding. The accompanying text, in turn, acts as a hermeneutic response, positioning the manuscript's visual-textual interplay as a dialogue rather than a hierarchy. Thus, visual strategies within Persian Qur'ānic manuscripts participate actively in the interpretive process, offering an early form of visual exegesis grounded in layout and composition.

⁶⁵ Kress and Leeuwen, *Reading Images*, 179–85.

VISUAL ANALYSIS OF IBRĀHĪM'S SACRIFICIAL ILLUSTRATION OF *QIṢAṢ AL-‘ANBIYĀ’* (MS. 18576)

Building upon the previous section, it is evident that the absence of anchorage, traditionally fulfilled by Qur’ānic verse, can be compensated for through other semiotic forms, such as narrative prose and illustration. In this case, the illustration not only serves as a visual substitute for the missing verses, specifically Q. 37:103-111, which recount the divine intervention and replacement of Ismā‘īl with a ram, but also interprets them. The following discussion will analyse the role of illustrations in interpreting the meaning of those Qur’ānic verses. However, prior to that, it must first be concerned with extracting several substantive elements of visual signs that can be interpreted from the illustration of Ibrāhīm’s sacrificial scene in this manuscript.



Figure 2 An image of the event of the substitution of Ismā‘īl with a ram.

Source: author’s collections

Undoubtedly, the manuscript contains numerous visual signs that reflect the painter’s imaginative reconstruction of the story of Ibrāhīm. These representational

choices, ranging from iconographic elements to stylistic conventions, must be situated within premodern Islam's broader cultural and religious context, particularly the Safavid period in which the manuscript was produced. Interpreting these signs within their historical framework enables a deeper understanding of how theological, artistic, and socio-political dynamics help to inform the visualisation of prophetic narratives during this era.

Moreover, this approach also reveals that the images reflect the appropriation of religious meanings and intentions specific to their time of production. During the Safavid period, when Twelver Shī'ism (*Ithnā 'Asharīyah*) was institutionalized as the state religion, Shī'ī rituals and symbols underwent significant transformation, resulting in a synthesis of Persian, Sufi (mysticism), and Shī'ī elements.⁶⁶ This syncretic dynamic is manifested in the manuscript's illustrative style, which offers valuable insight into the theological symbolism and the cultural aesthetics of its Safavid context.

Looking at the illustration, the substitution scene is rendered with striking clarity. Two central human figures dominate the composition: one standing, adorned in a blue robe, and another kneeling or seated in red, both with flames or halos encircling their heads, which are clearly identifiable as Ibrāhīm and Ismā'īl, respectively.⁶⁷ In the upper right corner, a winged human figure, possibly the angel Jibrīl, descends as a divine agent while holding a ram. The setting describes the situation where the miracle event takes place. It occurs on green ground surrounded by plants and rocks on the right side of the illustration. Everything is drawn and painted in bright and diverse colours.

The artistic and iconographical style of the manuscript aligns with what has been previously identified as the third stylistic category, one that developed in non-royal settings, likely outside the major artistic centres of Safavid Iran, such as Qazvin or Isfahan.⁶⁸ Despite its deliberate provincial origins, the style clearly

⁶⁶ Maryam Ekhtiar, "Infused with Shi'ism: Representations of the Prophet in Qajar Iran," in *The Image of the Prophet between Ideal and Ideology*, ed. Christiane Gruber and Avinoam Shalem (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), 98; Newman, *Safavid Iran*.

⁶⁷ Milstein, "Islam, Art, and Depictions of Prophets"; Gruber, "Between Logos (Kalima) And Light (Nūr)"; Gruber, *The Praiseworthy One*, 229–30; Ekhtiar, "Infused with Shi'ism: Representations of the Prophet in Qajar Iran," 103.

⁶⁸ Milstein, Rührdanz, and Schmitz, *Stories of the Prophets: Illustrated Manuscripts of Qiṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'*.

absorbed elements of the Safavid Persian visual tradition, which reached its height in the mid-16th century. The depiction of figures in this manuscript is notably expressive, communicative, and dramatic, albeit not always anatomically accurate. Figures are often rendered with rigid or inconsistent proportions; however, their bodily gestures are pronounced, effectively conveying emotions such as fear, submission, or astonishment.

In contrast to the refined aesthetics and visual sophistication typical of Safavid courtly art, this style emphasizes narrative clarity and religious function. Its primary aim appears to be the communication of moral and spiritual messages to the viewer, rather than the pursuit of visual perfection. This can be seen in the frequent use of dramatic poses and symbolic motifs, including the nimbus, turban, and upward-pointing hand gestures. This visual language reflects a synthesis of established Persian iconographic traditions, particularly those associated with Tabriz and Shiraz, with more provincial and popular artistic sensibilities. It is likely that the manuscript was produced in a non-royal context and intended for a broader, possibly devotional audience.⁶⁹

Aside from the artistic style of the figurative depictions, other important ornaments also have their own meaning. One apparent yet unique visual sign is the recurring motif of burning flames encircling the prophets' heads, which does not merely function as an aesthetic device but carries theological significance. This motif symbolizes *nūr*—a luminosity that often denotes the divine light of prophecy and proximity to God.⁷⁰ This is also reinforced by the painting of this motif in gold, which is often used as a divine light or light of glory color in Persian miniature.⁷¹ This iconographic convention, widely employed in Persian manuscript illustration, signifies the *maqām* (spiritual rank) of prophets as bearers of divine truth. Such visual representations are especially prominent in depictions of the Prophet

⁶⁹ Ibid., 93–102.

⁷⁰ Gruber, *The Praiseworthy One*; Gruber, “Between Logos (Kalima) And Light (Nūr).”

⁷¹ Zahra Abdollah and Hasan Bolkhari Ghehi, “Aesthetic of Color and Connotations of Spiral Structure (An Assessment of Medieval Persian Miniature),” *International Journal of Arts* 4, no. 1 (2014): 17–23.

Muhammad and ‘Alī, both of whom occupy central positions in Shī‘ī theology.⁷² This symbolic addition of halos or prophetic flames had not yet been formalized in the earliest phases of Islamic painting, but became increasingly codified in later Persianate visual traditions, particularly within Shī‘ī contexts.



Figure 3 The blazing gold flame motif on the prophet character.

From left to right: (top) Image of Ibrāhīm and Ismā‘īl with blazing flame as a sign of prophethood. (bottom): comparison with halo images in other illustrated manuscripts. On the left is the image of Muhammad in Shaybanī’s text about Mi’rāj, and on the right is the image of Yūsuf in the pit in Jāmi’s *Haft Awrang*.

Source: author’s collections, Gruber’s *the Praiseworthy One*, and Milstein’s *Stories of the Prophet*

The outfits worn by the three figures also reflect a distinctly Persian visual aesthetic. Prophets Ibrāhīm and Ismā‘īl are depicted in richly colored garments, blue and red respectively, adorned with gold motifs, headgear, and caps. This sartorial representation is apparent, particularly when considered in light of the historical and geographical distance between the real era of Ibrāhīm and the Safavid period in which the manuscript was produced. It appears that the painters

⁷² For more extensive information, see: Ekhtiar, “Infused with Shi‘ism: Representations of the Prophet in Qajar Iran”; Gruber, “Between Logos (Kalima) And Light (Nūr)”; Gruber, *The Praiseworthy One*.

reimagined the prophets' appearance and attributes through the lens of Safavid fashion, acculturating contemporary clothing styles into their depiction.

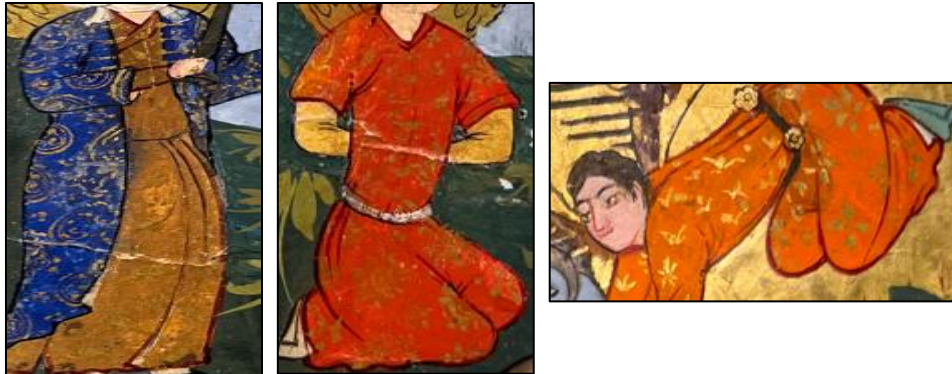


Figure 4 Garments adorned with golden motifs
Source: author's collection

In Persian miniature painting, especially during the Safavid period, prophets and male figures of authority are often portrayed wearing long-sleeved tunics, open robes (*qabā*), and wide trousers (*shalvār*), frequently paired with a sash (*kamarband*) and a turban (*dastār*). The headgear typically includes a twelve-gored felt or brocade cap (*tāj*) with a tall, pointed finial, often in red or coordinated with the overall color scheme of the attire. These clothing styles are closely associated with the Safavid elite and the upper classes, reinforcing a sense of social and symbolic status.⁷³ The visual alignment of Ibrāhīm and Ismā‘īl with such elite Safavid attire, alongside other elements like the radiant flames encircling their heads, further elevates their status, not only as historical figures but as theological authorities. Their depiction signals a fusion of religious veneration with cultural aesthetics, projecting prophetic sanctity through the iconographic codes of Safavid nobility.

Beyond its symbolic role as an agent of divine will, the angel in the manuscript is depicted in an anthropomorphic form, characterized by a human-like face and body with the addition of prominent wings. The facial features are oval and human in appearance, and the clothing closely resembles that of other figures in the scene, likely reflecting garments associated with elevated social or spiritual

⁷³ Layla S. Diba, "CLOTHING x. In the Safavid and Qajar Periods," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, December 15, 1992, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/clothing-x/>.

status.⁷⁴ One of the most striking attributes, however, is the angel's expansive, upward-reaching wings, adorned with long, pointed feathers.⁷⁵ In the tradition of Persian miniature painting, such a depiction signifies angels of exalted rank, typically those entrusted with delivering divine messages or enacting divine will.⁷⁶

The wings, in this case, not only emphasize the angel's celestial nature but also convey its power, majesty, and spiritual authority. Notably, the dominant use of gold in the illustration—particularly on the angel's wings—further reinforces its divine affiliation. As previously observed in the depiction of prophetic figures surrounded by radiant flames, gold in this manuscript is a visual marker of *nūr* (divine light). Combined with the descending vector of the angel's movement from the sky, these elements collectively affirm the angel's role as a clear and authoritative emissary of the divine. This meaning is what the Safavid painters imagined about the angel, especially when they combined the lore of the fairy (*Pari*) and Islamic tradition about angelic attributes.⁷⁷

The sky in the illustration is rendered in gold, signifying its illumination by divine light. As with the earlier interpretation of the angel's gold-colored wings, this use of gold suggests that the descent of the divine agent radiates light that fills and transforms the entire celestial space. This effect is visually reinforced by the stark contrast between the golden sky above and the blue hues below, which likely represent a lake or river adjacent to the scene. The interplay of these colors enhances the dramatic atmosphere and symbolically delineates the heavenly and earthly realms within the composition.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ The depiction of angels in the Muslim imagination, particularly in Persian Miniatures, is said to resemble their depiction in the Christian tradition, with the notable difference being the colour of the wings (Persian and Islamic miniatures are more colourful). Sheila Blair et al., eds., *Images of Paradise in Islamic Art* (Hanover: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, 1991), 36.

⁷⁶ Azhom Mohseni Tafti and Ali Reza Karimi, "The Analysis of Angel Motif in the Paintings of Prophet Muhammad's Ascension During Timurid and Safavid Period," *Alzahra Research Journal of Graphic Arts & Painting* 2, no. 3 (January 2020).

⁷⁷ Maryam Lari, "The Images of Angels in Iranian Art: A Civilization Interaction in a Comparative Study," *International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanity Study* 3, no. 1 (2011): 253.



Figure 5 Sky's color

The colour of the sky and the colour of the puddle are contrasted between gold and blue.

While certain colours, such as the previously discussed gold, can be interpreted as carrying symbolic meaning, others appear more ambiguous, particularly within the context of Safavid visual culture. The use of bright and contrasting colours in the garments, for instance, does not seem to convey specific iconographic or symbolic significance, and may instead reflect the aesthetic preferences of the individual painter.⁷⁸ This opens the possibility of contextual interpretation, particularly regarding the manuscript's production and patronage.

In that case, within the broader history of Safavid illustrated manuscripts, works commissioned by the royal court were often characterized by intricate detail, lavish use of colour, and compositional refinement. A pertinent comparison can be drawn with the *Shahnameh of Shah Tahmasp*, an exemplar of court-sponsored production noted for its visual richness and elaborate palette.⁷⁹ By contrast, the relatively modest execution of colour in the manuscript under study—while still refined—may suggest that the royal court did not commission it, but rather produced it under non-courtly patronage. This possibility invites further consideration of the manuscript's intended audience and the socio-cultural context

⁷⁸ Milstein, Rührdanz, and Schmitz, *Stories of the Prophets: Illustrated Manuscripts of Qīṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'*.

⁷⁹ The style of the manuscripts is often referred to as the Safavid imperial art style, which emerged from the synthesis of two prominent artistic schools of the period: the Herat and Tabriz schools. These traditions were epitomized by two of the most celebrated painters of the time—Behzād, associated with the Herat school, and Sulṭān Muḥammad, representing the Tabriz school. In contrast, the visual characteristics of the Qīṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā' manuscript reflect a departure from this imperial aesthetic. This divergence can be understood within the broader historical context of changing patterns of artistic patronage, particularly after the reign of Shah Ṭahmāsp I, when the court's interest in commissioning illustrated manuscripts is believed to have declined. As royal sponsorship diminished, the production of manuscripts gradually shifted toward more modest, often non-courtly environments, leading to stylistic variations such as those found in the Qīṣaṣ manuscript. Abolala Soudavar and Milo Cleveland Beach, *Art of the Persian Courts: Selections from the Art and History Trust Collection* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 159.

in which it was created. As Milstein (2000) notes, the limited number of components in a given miniature may be related to the limited budget for these apparently non-royal manuscripts, but it may also result from iconographical evolution.⁸⁰

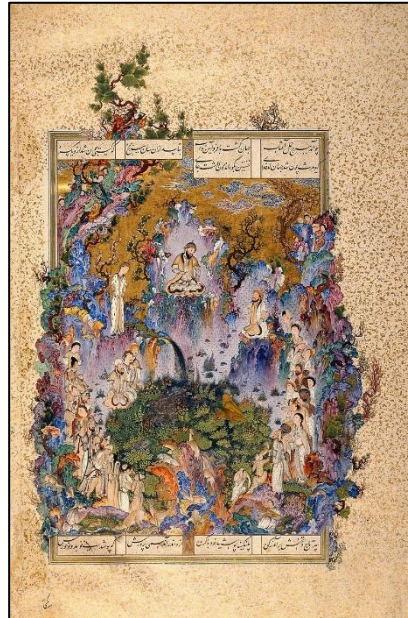


Figure 6 One of the illustrations in Shahnameh Shah Tahmasp
It is visible how one of the stories in it (about the Court Kayumars) is depicted
in a detailed colour and style (imperial art style).

Source: Attributed to Sultan Muhammad - Transferred from ru.wikipedia to
Commons. Original uploader was Евгений Ардаев at ru.wikipedia (28
August 2008 (first version); 28 August 2008 (last version)), Public Domain,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=7849984>

It is essential to recognize that not all Iranian miniaturists and artists were mystics, and some may have been unaware of the symbolic or mystical meanings attributed to color and light. Nevertheless, the foundational principles of Islamic-Iranian miniature painting were shaped by a religious worldview and a mystical perspective on human existence. The fusion of Islamic philosophy with pre-Islamic Iranian beliefs gave rise to an artistic system that prioritized meaning over formal aesthetics, where visual form served as a vehicle for conveying deeper significance. Although many of these profound conceptual foundations have faded over time,

⁸⁰ Milstein, Rühdanz, and Schmitz, *Stories of the Prophets: Illustrated Manuscripts of Qiṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'*, 25.

their influence persists in the tradition of Iranian miniature painting, continuously revitalized through encounters with new cultural currents.

IMAGES AS VISUAL EXEGETES

The following section presents a semiotic analysis of the illustration using Roland Barthes' (2005) framework of two-order semiotics, with particular attention to how meaning is constructed through the image's vectors⁸¹—specifically through denotation, connotation, and myth. While the previous discussion addressed individual visual cues and their meanings within the context of premodern Islam, this section shifts focus to the three central figures and the interactions between them that compose the scene of Ismā'īl's substitution. Special emphasis is placed on the role of the vector, as its form and directionality serve as key elements in establishing the relationship between image, meaning, and interpretation. This analysis is crucial to the broader argument of this study, as it explores how images may function as exegetical tools—offering visual commentary and clarification of Qur'ānic verses, particularly in the narrative of the attempted sacrifice and divine intervention.

At least three vectors can be examined through the image. The first vector is formed by the figure of Ibrāhīm standing upright, holding a knife, with his posture and gaze directed upward. A second vector is created by the figure of Ismā'īl, depicted in a submissive posture—seated with his head bowed and his hands bound. The final vector is represented by the angel, shown descending from above while holding a ram in both hands. These three directional vectors structure the composition and establish a dynamic interaction among the figures, visually narrating the moment of divine intervention and the substitution of Ismā'īl with the sacrificial ram. According to Barthes' (2005) semiotic framework, these visual components constitute the level of denotation, the first level of semiotics, referring to the literal and directly observable meaning of the image before any cultural or symbolic associations are made.⁸²

⁸¹ Vector here refers to the interaction between illustrations' participants (i.e., figures) Kress and Leeuwen, *Reading Images*.

⁸² Barthes and Lavers, *Mythologies*, 113–14.

Denotation: Three different vectors of the sacrificial scene		
		
Ibrāhīm holds the knife with its upward gaze and orientation.	Ismā'īl was tied up and sitting.	The angel came down with the ram.

Table 2 The Construction of literal meanings (Ibrāhīm's, Ismā'īl's, and the angel's vectors)

This visual composition subsequently generates connotative meanings, which constitute a second-order signification built upon cultural codes and associations. Several symbolic signs can then be identified within the scene. The figure of Ibrāhīm, standing with a knife in his hand, embodies an act of submission and unwavering obedience to divine command. The upward orientation of the knife reinforces this spiritual hierarchy, signalling not a relational dynamic between humans but rather a vertical connection between the servant and the Divine. Ismā'īl's seated posture, in turn, signifies *khudū'*—humility and sincere acceptance of divine will—mirroring the inner spiritual disposition expected in prophetic piety. Meanwhile, the angel descending with a ram visually represents divine intervention and serves as a symbolic manifestation of heavenly reward and mercy in response to their obedience. These layered signs form a network of connotations that collectively reinforce a theological mythos of sacrificial faith, obedience, and divine grace.

These connotative elements culminate in the formation of myth, in the Barthesian sense: a semiotic mechanism through which socially and culturally constructed values are rendered natural, timeless, and incontestable. In this context,

the three connotations articulated above collectively construct a theological myth. First, the Abrahamic sacrifice is portrayed as the ultimate existential test of faith. Second, the visual emphasis on obedience highlights a hierarchy in which submission to divine revelation supersedes all other relational bonds, including emotional, biological, or egoistic ones. Third, the arrival of the angel with the ram signals divine mercy as a direct recompense for absolute faithfulness. When taken together, these visual codes naturalise a central theological message: Sacrifice is the supreme trial of faith because it demands the subordination of the self to revelation, and in return, divine grace is assured. This myth becomes a visual theology, one that instructs the viewer not merely through narrative but through the moral weight embedded in its imagery.

The meaning conveyed by the manuscript under study bears a strong resemblance to that found in other manuscripts housed in different collections. The visual depictions are largely consistent, differing only in minor aspects such as pigment choices or subtle variations in figural style, whether in portraying the prophet or the angel. However, the placement of illustrations within the manuscript folios may vary across copies, which can influence or even disrupt the interpretive function and the semantic anchorage provided by the original composition. Despite these differences, a unifying feature across these manuscripts is their shared visual engagement with the Qur'ānic account of the sacrifice of Ismā'īl, particularly the moment of his substitution with the ram, as narrated in Q. 37:103–111.



Figure 7 Some Images of Ismā'il's sacrificial scene in other illustrated Qīṣaṣ manuscripts. [from left to right]: (above) far left is the illustration of the manuscript in France, and the two after are illustrations of the manuscript in New York, but in different locations. (below) The left is of unknown provenance, and the right is taken from the Library of Congress of the United States.

Source: Milstein's *Stories of the Prophet* and the Library of Congress of the US

When the illustration acts as an anchorage to replace the missing verse citation in the manuscript (the Ms. 18576), the previous three key components of denotation, connotation, and myth operate with similar functions, particularly in compensating for the absence of direct Qur'ānic citation during the final phases of Todorov's narrative structure (i.e., the stages of repair and new equilibrium). In this context, the illustration functions not merely as a decorative element but assumes a dual role: first, as a substitute for the missing anchoring verses, and second, as a visual exegete that conveys the theological and narrative implications of the sacrifice. Thus, the image becomes an interpretive apparatus, visually articulating what the text omits and actively participating in the exegetical act. With this argument, the final interpretive function of the illustration lies in its ability to convey meanings that surpass the limitations of verbal language. The image not only narrates but also animates the theological drama, offering an imaginative entry point for the viewer. In W.J.T. Mitchell's (2005) terms, the image operates as the

role of a quasi-object, denoting a visual entity imbued with personhood, agency, and intentionality. He writes,

*“Pictures are things that have been marked with all the stigmata of personhood and animation: they exhibit both physical and virtual bodies; they speak to us, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively... they present not just a surface but a face that faces the beholder.”*⁸³

He continues,

*“The picture wants... a kind of mastery over the beholder... to transfix or paralyze the beholder, turning him or her into an image for the gaze of the picture.”*⁸⁴

The image “wants,” using Mitchell’s (2005) phrase, a kind of interpretive authority over the viewer, capturing their gaze and shaping their understanding of the prophetic event. It participates in meaning-making, acting as a visual *tafsīr* or even the *mufasssīr* (interpreter), also embodying what the text cannot articulate, and inviting the beholder into an interpretive engagement that transcends the textual. Having said that, it can be understood that these illustrations function as interpretive agents by visually articulating theological meanings that complement or substitute Qur’ānic textual elements. The example given in the image of the sacrificial substitution of Ismā‘īl with a ram visually realises the meaning of Q. 37:103-111, even in the absence of the actual verses. It is through this semiotic richness that the illustration invites readers to reimagine and reexperience the divine event, offering not a mere representation but a reinterpretation of the classical Qur’ānic narrative, a form of visual *tafsīr* that opens theological reflection beyond the textual.

To further demonstrate how the meaning constructed through images aligns with the function of *tafsīr* and the role of the *mufasssīr*, which is to open the meaning, a comparative analysis with a number of *tafsīr* works complements the analysis. This comparison helps to elucidate how the layers of denotation, connotation, and myth found within the illustration correspond to exegetical interpretations in the textual tradition. At the denotative level, for instance, the visual elements in the

⁸³ Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 30.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

manuscript, such as the binding of Ismā‘īl and the descent of the sacrificial ram, mirror the narrative details found in several *tafsīr* works. Al-Qurṭubī [d. 1273], for instance, in his *al-Jāmi’ li Aḥkām al-Qur’ān*, notes that the ram offered as a substitute was the same ram offered by Hābīl (Abel), the son of Ādam in Paradise, and recounts a *khavar*⁸⁵ in which Ismā‘īl requests that his hands and feet be bound.⁸⁶ These elements are visually present in the illustration and encoded within the previous denotative sign system. Furthermore, the image’s depiction of a winged figure descending with the ram, which is interpreted in visual terms as the angel Jibrīl, corresponds closely with the textual tradition. Such examples in *Tafsīr al-Jalālain* or *Tafsīr al-‘Ālūsī* (i.e., *Rūḥ al-Ma’ānī*) support this interpretation, explicitly stating that the ram was brought by the angel Jibrīl from heaven down to earth.⁸⁷ ‘Ālūsī [d. 1854], in his work, citing Ibn ‘Abbās [d. 687], affirms that it was Jibrīl who presented the ram to Ibrāhīm.⁸⁸

In the realm of connotation and myth, the visual meaning transcends the literal and becomes embedded within broader ideological and theological narratives. A parallel can be found as well in the *Tafsīr* of Muqātil ibn Sulaymān [d. 767], one of the earliest classical *tafsīr* works, who states that a *muḥsin*, one who performs righteous deeds and endures trials with sincerity, will always be rewarded with *jazā’* (i.e., divine recompense).⁸⁹ This notion of divine reward aligns with the connotative message of the illustration, in which the substitution of Ismā‘īl with a ram visually encodes the idea that obedience and submission to divine command result in mercy and reward. The same exegetical theme is echoed by al-Ṭabarī [d. 923], who in his *tafsīr* interprets the act of Ibrāhīm’s intended sacrifice as the ultimate trial (*ibtilā’*) that merits divine favour and compensation.⁹⁰ These examples

⁸⁵ Khabar refers to information that is attributed to the Companions.

⁸⁶ Abū ‘Abdillāh Muḥammad al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi’ li Aḥkām al-Qur’ān: wa al-Mubayyan limā Taḍammanahu min al-Sunnah wa Āy al-Furqān*, 1st ed., vol. 18 (Beirut: Muassasah al-Risālah, 2006), 69.

⁸⁷ Jalāluddīn al-Maḥallī and Jalāluddīn al-Suyūṭī, *Tafsīr al-Jalālain al-Muyassar*, 1st ed. (Beirut: Maktabah Lubnān Nāshirūn, 2003), 450.

⁸⁸ Shihāb al-Dīn Maḥmūd al-‘Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma’ānī fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Adhīm wa Sab’ al-Mathānī*, vol. 23 (Beirut: Dār Ihya’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, n.d.), 131–32.

⁸⁹ Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, 1st ed. (Beirut: Muassasah al-Tārīkh al-‘Arabī, 2002), 615.

⁹⁰ Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-Bayān min Ta’wīli Āy al-Qur’ān*, 1st ed., vol. 21 (Cairo: Badr Hijr, n.d.), 894.

of readings demonstrate that the connotative signification of the image—where submission culminates in divine mercy—is not only a visual myth but also a theological message deeply rooted in classical exegesis.

It can be inferred that this congruence between the visual representation and the *tafsīr* tradition confirms that the illustration in this particular manuscript functions as more than artistic embellishment. It serves multiple functions: first, the illustration substitutes the missing semantic anchor (Qur’ānic verse) of Ibrāhīm’s attempted sacrifice of Ismā‘īl’s narrative in this manuscript (Ms. 18576); second, it visualizes and interprets those missing verses; third, it brings its pre-modern meanings and ideologies of the place and time in which this manuscript was produced and adds information to the story of Ibrāhīm about how the process of divine reward occurred in appropriated illustration.⁹¹ In sum, it operates as a visual exegesis: a semiotic interpretation that reflects and reinforces the textual *tafsīr*, thereby assuming a parallel hermeneutical authority.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of its historical development, *Qışaş al-‘Anbiyā’* emerged as a distinct genre of Islamic literature closely tied to the discourses of the Qur’ān and *tafsīr*. Initially functioning as a didactic and exegetical corpus aimed at elaborating the lives of the Prophets, this genre gradually evolved beyond its textual boundaries. By the 16th century, particularly during the Safavid period, it intersected with the flourishing of Islamic art and manuscript culture, resulting in its transformation into richly illustrated manuscripts. This integration marked a significant shift wherein theological narrative, exegetical tradition, and visual expression coalesced into a unified artistic-literary form.

The illustrated manuscript of al-Nishāpūrī’s *Qışaş al-‘Anbiyā’* is, indeed, a multimodal text—a term which, following Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, refers to a text that combines two or more semiotic modes to construct and communicate its message. In this manuscript, the interpretive retelling of classical Qur’ānic narratives, such as the episode of Ibrāhīm and Ismā‘īl, is articulated

⁹¹ Appropriated story of Ibrāhīm here means that the illustration has been appropriated to follow what cultural trend the Safavid period experienced at that time.

through the integrated use of Qur'ānic verses, narrative prose, and miniature illustrations. These elements are not juxtaposed arbitrarily; instead, they interact strategically to reinforce and expand the text's meaning. The Qur'ānic verses anchor the theological core, while the narrative prose mediates and elaborates on the storyline. The illustrations, in turn, serve as both visual representations and exegetical agents, filling interpretive gaps and activating the reader's imagination. Together, these modes produce a layered exegesis that operates through both textual and visual channels, demonstrating the manuscript's function as a dynamic, multimodal act of interpretation.

The strategic integration and inclusion, when it is traced further, unfolds through distinct, interrelated modes: structural, semantic, and layout-based. Structural appears when the Qur'ānic verses, prose narrative, and images are strategically positioned at separate intervals, creating a temporal delay that cultivates narrative suspense and heightens the emotional and theological weight of the scene. This deliberate disjunction also fosters a form of semantic anchorage, albeit not always provided through literally written verse alone. Instead, the manuscript compensates for the absence of anchoring verses through prose elaboration and culminating illustrations. This is the second interrelated mode of the manuscript. The layout-based approach also indicates that the position between the illustration and the text produces information value of Given and New, where the illustration of Ibrāhīm serves as an emphasis point to attract the reader's gaze and shift toward new information.

In this specific manuscript, the illustration thus assumes multiple functions: not only as a visual substitute for absent Qur'ānic citations and their visualizer but also as a means of bringing its pre-modern meanings and ideologies of the place and time in which the manuscript was produced and adds information to the story of Ibrāhīm about how the process of divine reward occurred in the appropriated illustration. It also operates as an exegetical device that interprets and expands upon the narrative. In this sense, the image does not merely accompany the text but performs interpretive labor akin to that of a *mufasssir*. This is exemplified through Barthes' semiotic framework, in which the illustration's denotative, connotative, and mythic levels of meaning collectively articulate theological and moral insights.

These visual interpretations can be meaningfully compared with non-visual (textual) exegetical traditions, such as those found in the works of a number of *tafsīr*, thereby positioning the image as a legitimate hermeneutic actor within the manuscript's multimodal framework.

Taking everything into account, this phenomenon introduces a significant shift within the broader discourse of Islamic art, where such production of it constitutes people's reception. It also contributes to the broader discourse of *tafsīr*, which may be coined as *tafsīr bi al-ṣūrah* (visual exegesis), or in the terminology of Zahro and Pink, "Visual Tafsir" and "Tafsir in Picture." Although the illustrated manuscript does not constitute a formal exegetical text in the conventional sense, it nonetheless operates as a partial yet intentional form of interpretation. As a multimodal artifact, it mobilizes visual strategies that not only complement but actively construct meaning, allowing the image to assume an exegetical function. The manuscript thus reconfigures the relationship between word and image, transforming classical Qur'ānic narratives, such as prophetic stories, into a dynamic, embodied hermeneutic encounter. Rather than merely supporting the text, the illustrations assume a narratorial role, inviting the viewer to engage in a contemplative act of seeing that parallels the exegetical act of reading. In this way, the illustrated *Qīṣaṣ al-'Anbiyā'* does not merely extend interpretation beyond the textual domain: it redefines the very modalities through which Qur'ānic meaning can be accessed, experienced, and internalized.

However, the function of illustrations in other prophetic narratives may yield different interpretive outcomes, depending on their positioning within the manuscript. This variation becomes particularly evident when comparing depictions of the story of Ibrāhīm across different manuscripts, where differences in structure, layout, or spatial placement can significantly influence the viewer's interpretive and hermeneutical engagement. Despite these variations, one central claim remains consistent: illustrations can function as interpretative acts, offering visual exegesis that complements, extends, or reconfigures the textual narrative.

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