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The Miracles of Solomon: A Comparative Study of Al-Tha‘labī’s *Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā’* and “The City of Brass,” a Tale in the *Arabian Nights* Collection

Abstract: Solomon’s miracles lived beyond the time of the king himself, as his legend circulated in different geographical areas for several centuries. These miracles resonated from the sixth to the thirteenth centuries, constituting a common cultural legacy, shared by the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic societies. In the Qur’ān, Solomon could command the wind and communicate with birds and demons; in Al-Tha‘labī’s *Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā’*, Solomon’s throne, a sculpted design with three thousand chairs of gold and silver around them, followed him wherever he went. Motifs of Solomon’s miracles are found in a series of commentaries, anthologies, folktales, and erudite traditions. This study aims to explore the textual representations of Solomon’s miracles in Al-Tha‘labī’s *Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’* (Lives of the Prophets) and “The City of Brass,” a tale in the *Arabian Nights* collection. To achieve this goal, the portrayal of Solomon and the implications of his miracles are compared within the frameworks of the two narratives. Because religious and fantastical texts are shaped in their historical and cultural contexts, a historical approach is applied to help situate the narratives within their contexts and investigate how these accounts reflect the social and religious dynamics of their time. By exploring the structural and thematic parallels and divergences of these two accounts, the study offers insights into the multifaceted interpretations of Solomon’s story within Islamic literature and folktales, contributing to the broader understanding of Solomon as a figure of wisdom and miraculous power.

Keywords: Al-Tha‘labī’s *Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’*, the City of Brass, miracles, Islamic literature, folktales, justice, throne

Introduction

The phenomenon of ‘miracle’ exists in all cultures; however, it is hard to define; it is known worldwide as “an event inexplicable by science,”¹ something that functions as a spiritual message sent from God to His chosen prophets to support them and help people accept the true faith and avoid the wrath of God. According to Michael E. Goodich, “The term miraculum is derived from mirus, namely something to wonder at, a phenomenon which confounds or even appears to contradict the normal rules governing nature or society.”² Thus, a miracle is a sign which can only be attributed to divine power.

Ingo Schneider states that miracle narratives are found not only in religious works but also in folktales and legendary accounts.³ We can subscribe to Schneider’s opinion since miracles are contained in religious and literary narratives worldwide; however, the presentation of miracles differs based on the genre of the narrative. While religious accounts depict prophets’ deeds as miracles, literary narratives portray them as wonders (fantastic and extraordinary events). For example, the depictions of Solomon’s miracles – a shared cultural legacy in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic societies – vary in religious and fantasy texts. In exegetical texts, Solomon’s miracles serve to highlight preaching messages, whereas in fictional accounts, such as the tales contained in the collection of the *Arabian Nights*, these miracles function as entertaining tools that emphasize supernatural powers. A comparative analysis of the narrative structures of a religious text about Solomon’s miracles and a tale that alludes to these miracles helps explore how the contexts of these narratives dictate their structures and convey the meanings of these miracles distinctively.

The story of Solomon and his miracles in Al-Tha’labī’s *Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā’*, written in the eleventh century C.E., depicts Solomon as a prophet-king whose miraculous feats and encounters with supernatural beings underscore his exalted status in Islamic tradition.⁴ The literal translation of Al-Tha’labī’s book entitled in Arabic as *‘Arā’ is al-majālis fi qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* is *Brides of the Sessions in Tales of the Prophets*;

1 Adam Świeżyński, “The Concept of Miracle as an ‘Extraordinary Event,’” *Roczniki Filozoficzne* 60.2 (2012): 89–108; here 89. See also Albrecht Classen’s Introduction to this volume.

2 Michael E. Goodich, *Miracles and Wonders: The Development of the Concept of Miracle, 1150–1350*. Church, Faith, and Culture in the Medieval West (2007; London: Routledge, 2016), 21.

3 Ingo Schneider, “Wunder,” *Enzyklopädie des Märchens: Handwörterbuch zur historischen und vergleichenden Erzählforschung*, ed. Rolf Wilhelm Brednich. Vol. 14.3 (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2013), 1035–43.

4 R. Brian Siebeking, “The Creation of an Islamic Literary Genre: Popular Religious Education in Tha’labī’s (d. 427/1035) Tales of the Prophets,” Ph.D. thesis, University of Virginia, 2017.

however, William M. Brinner, who published it in 2002, translated it as *Lives of the Prophets*. The narrative emphasizes Solomon's role as a ruler and prophet who governs with justice and wisdom, utilizing his God-given gifts to maintain harmony among his subjects and establish his dominion over the natural and supernatural realms.⁵ Additionally, the text places a strong emphasis on the moral lessons embedded within Solomon's experiences, highlighting the importance of piety and obedience to divine commandments.⁶ R. Brian Siebeking stresses the "fundamentally didactic genre" of Al-Tha'labī's *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*.⁷

In contrast, "The City of Brass," a tale in *the Arabian Nights* collection, uses Solomon's miracles for a different narrative purpose.⁸ Solomon is here portrayed as a historical figure whose exploits are recounted in the form of a fantastical tale set in a distant land.⁹ The narrative focuses less on Solomon's prophetic mission and more on the adventurous journey of the protagonists who stumble upon the remnants of his civilization.¹⁰ The characters encounter magical beings and perilous challenges; the recurring Solomonic motifs highlight the themes of curiosity, discovery, human folly,¹¹ and transience of life.

Thus, this study explores the parallels and divergences of Al-Tha'labī's *Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā'* and "The City of Brass" through examining their presentations of Solomon's miracles. To achieve this goal, the structural and thematic elements of the two accounts are compared. While Al-Tha'labī links Solomon's miracles to his divine wisdom, "The City of Brass" presents them in a fantastical manner; nonetheless, both accounts associate Solomon's miracles with justice and life brevity. The theological context of Al-Tha'labī's *Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* results in presenting Solomon's

5 'Arā'is Al-Majālis fī Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā' OR "The Lives of the Prophets" As Recounted by Abu Ishāq Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrahim Al-tha'labī, trans. and annotated by William M. Brinner (Leiden and New York: Brill, 2002).

6 Abi Obaida Mashhour ibn Hasan Al-Salman, *Kutub ḥadhar minhā al-'ulama'* (Books that Scholars Warned against) (Riyadh: Dar Al-ṣmi'i, 1995).

7 R. Brian Siebeking, "The Creation of an Islamic Literary Genre" (see note 4), iii.

8 "Introduction," *The Arabian Nights: Their Best-Known Tales*, ed. Kate Douglas Wiggin and Nora A. Smith. First Avenue Classics (1945; Minneapolis, MN: Lerner Publishing Group, 2018), 1–6; here 6. For a text edition, now online, see <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/swanseaebooks/reader.action?docID=5445507&ppg=189&pq-origsite=primo> (last accessed on June 11, 2024).

9 Bruce Fudge, "Signs of Scripture in 'The City of Brass,'" *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 8.1 (2006): 88–118.

10 Muḥannad Salhi, "A Thousand and One Nights: Arabian Story-Telling in World Literature," *Library of Congress Blogs* (October 26, 2017); online at: <https://blogs.loc.gov/international-collections/2017/10/a-thousand-and-one-nights-arabian-story-telling-in-world-literature/> (last accessed on June 10, 2024).

11 Christa A. Tuczay, "Motifs in The Arabian Nights and in Ancient and Medieval European Literature: A Comparison," *Folklore* 116.3 (2005): 272–91.

feats as miracles, and the fantastical context of “The City of Brass” produces them as wonders.

The first objective of this study is to compare the two narratives in order to highlight Al-Tha’labī’s depiction of Solomon as a king and prophet whose miracles go beyond natural laws and are attributed to divine intervention. Another objective is to examine the series of allusions to Solomon in “The City of Brass” and to investigate what these motifs recall. The comparative analysis promises to provide a broad understanding of Solomon’s miracles and how they strengthen faith through giving examples of people to follow.

This study comprises four sections. First, it gives a brief overview of the historical and religious significance of Solomon in Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions. Second, it compares the narrative structures of the two texts, highlighting the traditional narrative structure rooted in the religious-historical context in Al-Tha’labī’s account of Solomon and the fantastical narrative formation in “The City of Brass.” Third, the study explores the miracles of Solomon in Al-Tha’labī’s *Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā’* and Solomonic motifs in “The City of Brass.” Finally, it presents the findings, highlighting the impact of alluding to Solomon’s miracles on evoking in the reader “a feeling of amazement and admiration, caused by something beautiful, remarkable, or unfamiliar.”¹²

The Historical and Religious Significance of Solomon in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

Solomon is a common character in the three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In the history of Israel, Solomon, known as Shlomo the son of King David and Bathsheba,¹³ was a king, a sage (a wise man), and an architect credited with building the First Temple in Jerusalem, which became “the center of Israelite worship.”¹⁴ Solomon was the third king of Israel, the successor of his father, and

¹² Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (1970; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973), 26.

¹³ 2 Samuel 12: 24 says “Then David comforted his wife Bathsheba, and he went to her and made love to her. She gave birth to a son, and they named him Solomon. The LORD loved him.” online at: <https://www.biblestudytools.com/topical-verses/bible-verses-about-solomon/> (last accessed on June 14, 2024).

¹⁴ *The Figure of Solomon in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Tradition: King, Sage and Architect*, ed. Joseph Verheyden. Themes in Biblical Narrative, 16 (Leiden and New York: Brill, 2013), 1–6; here 2. for a text edition, now online, see <https://books.google.com.sa/books?id=28aDJyH-3FgC&printsec=frontcover&hl=ar#v=onepage&q&f=false> (last accessed on July 3, 2024).

his reign is often considered as a period of prosperity and peace in Israel's history.¹⁵ According to Sarit Shalev-Eyni, the origin of the stories about Solomon's control of demons goes back to Hellenistic Judaism, an ancient form of Judaism combining Jewish religious tradition with elements of Hellenistic culture. These stories extended to "later Judaic, Islamic and Christian culture."¹⁶

Shalev-Eyni states that Solomon's miracles are presented in the Babylonian Talmud, the central text of Rabbinic Judaism and the primary source of Jewish religious law and Jewish theology.¹⁷ The translation of the Babylonian Talmud represents a qualitative step toward revealing the most important source of the Israeli religious narratives that have penetrated a significant area of the Islamic heritage, especially *Tafāsīr*, exegeses (books that interpret the Qur'ān) and the stories of the prophets. The Babylonian Talmud adopted Solomon's miracle with the demons with an explicit aptness to avoid the pragmatic demonic aspects of the story,¹⁸ which resonates with Solomon's legend in the Qur'ān and medieval Hebrew Mahzor.¹⁹ Jewish, Christian, and Islamic books emphasize Solomon's divine power,²⁰ which elucidates the recurrent existence of this theme in Islamic works, whether religious or literary.²¹ Rachel Milstein states that God delivered a magical ring to Solomon to imprison the demons who "sucked out his energy through his thumb [and] stole half of the workman's provisions and wages"; the legend of Solomon's ring spread "into the *Arabian Nights* [and] medieval folklore."²²

15 Isaac Kalimi, "The Rise of Solomon in the Ancient Israelite Historiography," *The Figure of Solomon in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Tradition* (see note 14), 7–44, 8.

16 Sarit Shalev-Eyni, "Solomon, His Demons and Jongleurs: The Meeting of Islamic, Judaic and Christian Culture," *Al-Masāq* 18.2 (2006): 145–10; here 145; online at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09503110600838635> (last accessed on June 10, 2024).

17 Adin Steinsaltz, "What is the Talmud?" *The Essential Talmud*, trans. by Chaya Galai (30th anniversary ed.) (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 5–10.

18 Sarit Shalev-Eyni, "Solomon, His Demons and Jongleurs" (see note 16).

19 Mahzor is a Hebrew prayer book used in festivals, at special Sabbaths, and fasting days. It was ascribed to Judah bar Samuel 'Zaltman between 1257 and 1258 and now is known as Michael Mahzor (see the copy in the Oxford Bodleian Library, MS. Michael 619; see Thérèse and Mendel Metzger, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages: Illuminated Hebrew Manuscripts of the Thirteenth to the Sixteenth Centuries* (London: Alpine Fine Arts Collection, 1982), 306.

20 *Khatam Suleiman* (King Solomon's Seal), ed. Rachel Milstein (Jerusalem: Tower of David Museum of the History of Jerusalem, 1996), 184.

21 Rachel Milstein, Karin Ruhrdanz, and Barbara Schmitz, *Stories of the Prophets: Illustrated Manuscripts of Qisas al-anbiya'*. Islamic Art and Architecture Series, 6 (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1999), 144–45.

22 Sarah Iles Johnston, "The Testament of Solomon from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance," *The Metamorphosis of Magic from Late Antiquity to the Early Modern Period*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer and Jan R. Veenstra. Vol. 1 (Leuven, Paris, and Dudley: Peeters, 2002), 35–49; here 37.

Additionally, Solomon is traditionally associated with the authorship of several biblical texts, including the Book of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Songs of Solomon. Solomon is mentioned in three passages in the New Testament: John 10: 20–23, Apostles Acts 3: 2.10, and Acts 4: 1–3. These texts refer to the portico of Solomon's Jerusalem temple.²³ Solomon's glory is represented in Matthew 6: 28–30 and Luke 12: 27–28, whereas Solomon's richness and wisdom are recorded in 1 Kings 3: 10–13 and 1 Kings 3: 9 respectively. Matthew 1: 6 and Luke 3: 31 provide information about Jesus's genealogy; the former refers to Solomon, while the latter refers to Nathan as the son of David. Hence, Matthew's focus on the royal lineage contrasts with Luke's theological interest.²⁴ Hence, the biblical text does not mention supernatural aspects about Solomon; it offers a starting point for his wisdom, as depicted in the biblical account where he resolved a dispute between two women claiming to be the mother of a child. When he suggested to split the baby in two halves; the true (non-biological) mother's identity was revealed.

In Islamic traditions, Solomon holds a significant place as a prophet and a king. He is mentioned extensively in the Qur'an as a righteous ruler blessed with divine wisdom and the ability to communicate with animals and jinn (supernatural beings). The seventeen Qur'anic verses about Solomon are Q 21: 78–82, Q 27: 20–30, Q 34: 12, Q 38: 36; they are mentioned in Al-Tha'labi's version of the story of Solomon. These verses describe Solomon as someone who has wisdom and knowledge, commands mountains, birds, winds and the jinn, and talks the language of birds. Similar to the Judeo-Christian tradition, Islamic lore reveres Solomon for his just governance and piety. The Qur'anic account also includes stories of Solomon's interactions with various creatures and his judicious rulings. Overall, in Islamic teachings, Solomon is viewed as a model of faith, wisdom, and leadership.

The historical significance of Solomon results from his biblical and archaeological sources. The biblical legend of Solomon results in him being a historical but also legendary figure that is also used in literature to explore the themes of wisdom and the construction of the Temple.²⁵ In the seventh century, various priests wrote the history of monarchs including Solomon²⁶; their purpose was to demonstrate

23 Albert L. A. Hogeterp, "King Solomon in the New Testament and Jewish Tradition," *The Figure of Solomon in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Tradition* (see note 14), 143–63; online at: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004242913_009 (last accessed on June 18, 2024).

24 John Nolland, "The Illegitimacy of Jesus," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 47.2 (1996): 604–10; here 604.

25 Pablo A. Torijano, "Solomon and Magic," *The Figure of Solomon in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Tradition* (see note 14), 107–125.

26 Pekka Särkiö, "Solomon in History and Tradition," *The Figure of Solomon in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Tradition* (see note 14), 45–65; here 47.

Josiah's triumph over his enemies, his abolition of idolatry, and the re-establishment of the reign of David, Solomon's father.²⁷ Based on 1 Kings 9: 15, cities such as Hazor, Geser, and Megiddo had similar gates from Solomon's era; additionally, monumental structures were attributed to Solomon, the king, prophet, and architect. It can be concluded that the historical figure of Solomon is inseparable from his legend in religion, literature, and archaeology.

Thus, religiously and historically, Solomon is regarded as a monarch, wise man, and builder of the first temple. His glory and wisdom are referred to in the three Abrahamic religions; however, the Qur'an gives more details about his supernatural power, such as commanding mountains, winds, birds, and the jinn. In Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, Solomon's legacy extends beyond his historical reign as a king to symbolize virtues such as wisdom, justice, and devotion to God; therefore, his stories continue to inspire believers and serve as a source of spiritual guidance in both religious and literary traditions.

The Religious-Historical Narrative Structure of Al-Tha'labī's *Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā'* vs the Fantastical Narrative Structure of "The City of Brass"

Al-Tha'labī's *Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā'* is an Islamic text that narrates the stories of prophets, including Solomon's story, while "The City of Brass," a tale in the Arabian Nights collection, is a classic work of Arabic literature. A comparative analysis of the narrative structures of these two works discloses Al-Tha'labī's religious-historical context to serve the didactic nature of the story and the fantastical elements in "The City of Brass" to entertain the reader. In his portrayal of Solomon, Al-Tha'labī blends historical details with religious teachings to convey moral lessons about wisdom, faith, justice and divine power through relying on the Qur'an, historians, exegetes, and Hebrew Scriptures. Nonetheless, like other tales in *the Arabian Nights* collection, "The City of Brass" employs a unique narrative structure that enhances imaginative and otherworldly elements such as the quest narrative, a story within a story,²⁸ and magical realism (blending fantastical elements with everyday reality in a seamless way).

²⁷ Israel Finkelstein, Neil Asher Silberman, and David Rodman, "The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts," *Israel Affairs* 1 (2003): 151–57.
²⁸ Sura M. Khrais, "Structural Approach to The Arabian Nights," *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ)*. *Special Issue on Literature* 2 (2014): 125–36; online at: <https://awej.org/images/AllIssues/Specialissues/Literature2/10.pdf> (last accessed on June 16, 2024).

The purpose behind Al-Tha'labī's depiction of Solomon, particularly in terms of using his wisdom and abilities to preach the message of the faith, remains unclear. Abd Al-basiṭ Mirdas states that the fifth century A.H./eleventh century C.E. can be considered the century of codification and organization of the narrative called *Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā'* (Lives of the Prophets).²⁹ The same title was produced by different Muslim exegetes, such Ibn Mutrif Al-Tarfi and Muḥammad al-Kisā'i; however, for many centuries, Al-tha'labī's has been praised by scholars and criticized by others. Abū Ishāq Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ibrahim Al-nīsābūri Al-tha'labī (d. 427/1035) wrote *'Arā'is Al-Majālis fi Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā'* (Lives of the Prophets). Mirdas declares that Al-tha'labī's book, despite its ordinary language, had a special taste and a rare impact on him, for its way of telling the story and the depiction of wonders and strange creatures that are not beyond the power of God.

The Orientalist Isaiah Goldfeld states that Al-tha'labī's *Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā'* are mythological tales, a collection of previous interpretations dating back to Muqātil bin Sulaiman, Wabḥ bin Munabbih, Mujahid, Al-Kalbi, Al-Tabari and others.³⁰ Relying on these interpretive references shows Al-tha'labī's knowledge of past news and legends transmitted by ancient interpreters. The common information among interpreters is undoubtedly due to a shared oral and narrative reservoir. Goldfeld says that unlike exegetes of his time, Al-tha'labī displays interest in stories in the Torah and expands on them by mentioning stories of Israeli women. Goldfeld adds that Al-tha'labī's reliance on *Isra'īliyyat*, stories developed from Jewish sources, is criticized by Al-Dhahabī.³¹

On the other hand, Abd Al-basiṭ Mirdas classifies Al-tha'labī's *Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā'* as folk literature, which had a marginal position in ancient Arab culture and was called a yellow or sidewalk book³² due to its paper and selling on the sidewalks of mosques next to other public places. In his article "Narratives of the Lives of the Prophets, the Narrator, Discourse, and Structured Narration," Mirdas affirms that Al-tha'labī wrote the stories of prophets in thirty-two sessions; each

29 Abd Al-basiṭ Mirdas, "Rihlah ma'a Kitāb 'Arā'is Al-Majālis fi Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā'" (A Journey with the Book "Lives of the Prophets") *Alantologia* (2017); online at: <https://alantologia.com/page/19387/> (last accessed on July 5, 2024).

30 *Qur'ānic Commentary in the Eastern Islamic Tradition of the First Four Centuries of the Hijra: An Annotated Edition of the Preface to Al-Tha'labī's Kitāb Al-Kashf wal-Bayān 'an Tafṣīr Al-Qur'ān*, ed. Isaiah Goldfeld (Riyadh: Srugy, 1984).

31 *Qur'ānic Commentary in the Eastern Islamic Tradition of the First Four Centuries of the Hijra*, ed. Isaiah Goldfeld (see note 30).

32 Abd Al-basiṭ Mirdas, "Sardiyāt Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā': Al-rāwī walkhitāb wal-r iwayat almunazama" (Narratives of the Lives of the Prophets: The Narrator, Discourse, and Structured Narration), *Anfās* (2007); online at: https://www.anfasse.org/guvaccine/likelihead/1430_21165.xhtml (last accessed on July 5, 2024).

session is mostly devoted to the story of one of the prophets, with the exception of the first three sessions that narrate the myth of the creation of the universe.³³ Mirdas adds that Al-tha'labī's book, a collection of anecdotes organized into narrative sections called *majālis*, councils/meetings, is still read in many countries of the Arab world and beyond and has experienced several translations into foreign languages.

Discussing the themes of the stories in Al-tha'labī's *majālis*, councils/meetings, Mirdas confirms that the main subject of each *majlis* is a religious lesson learned through the opposition represented by ancient models such as Pharaoh and Haman. The common themes in Al-tha'labī's stories are the reward of the believers, justice, true righteousness, and God's might. Hence, the ultimate goal of Al-tha'labī's book is to preach the reader to follow the Messengers; the book is an important link within the series of writings that touch on the same topic, past and present.³⁴ I agree with Mirdas that Al-tha'labī's organization of the stories of the prophets within narrative assemblies endows these stories with the form of the stories of *the Thousand and One Nights*.

Lively Description and Magic Realism in “The City of Brass”

The Thousand and One Nights, known in the Arab world as *Alf layla wa-layla* and in the Western world as *the Arabian Nights*, is a collection of Middle Eastern folktales compiled in the Arabic language during the Islamic Golden Age. According to *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, the collection, following no specific timeline, appeared before the ninth century and rooted in a Persian prototype; some of its stories go back to early cultures such as the Mesopotamian and ancient Egyptian.³⁵ This Middle Eastern work has impacted the Western culture, supplied entertainment to generations of Western readers, and inspired a myriad

³³ Abd Al-basiṭ Mirdas, “Sardiyāt Qiṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā” (see note 32); online at: https://www.anfasse.org/guvacine/likelihead/1430_21165.xhtml (last accessed on June 14, 2024).

³⁴ Abd Al-basiṭ Mirdas, “Rihlah ma’a Kitāb ‘Arā’is Al-Majālis” (see note 29).

³⁵ Ulrich Marzolph and Richard van Leeuwen, *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2004); online at: <https://www.arvindguptatoys.com/arvindgupta/Arabian%20Nights.pdf> (last accessed on June 14, 2024).

of authors.³⁶ It contains references to the Qur'ān and includes *Sunnī* and *Shi'ī* stories.³⁷

The frame story of the collection is *King Shahryar and Queen Shahrazad*, in which every night Shahrazad tells a tale to her husband Shahryar, whose first wife is unfaithful. Shahryar punishes his wife's infidelity with slaves by killing her and her current lover, and decides to marry a virgin woman every night and then to cut off her head in the morning.³⁸ His loathing of women increased when his brother King Shahzaman suffers the same fate himself as his wife has had sexual relations with slaves, and when the two brothers confront a beautiful woman who is being held prisoner by the most frightening genie. Shahryar decides to marry a virgin bride every day and have her executed the next morning, yet Shahrazad, the daughter of his vizier, captivates him with her tales.

"The city of Brass," comprising the text from night 566 to 578, applies elements of fantastical narrative: revolving around a transformative journey with a specific quest, a tale within a tale, and a combination of reality and magic. It focuses on the magical and supernatural aspects of Solomon's abilities and exploration of the wonders of Solomon's realm in a more imaginative setting. It portrays a group of travelers on an expedition across the Sahara Desert to find an ancient lost city and attempt to recover brass bottles that Solomon once used to trap the rebellious jinn.

To identify the literary style of "The City of Brass," it is significant to consider the edition used in this research. This version was first published in 1909 and edited by Kate Douglas Wiggin and Nora A. Smith. This collection includes "The Story of Aladdin," "The Story of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," and "The Story of Sinbad the Voyager." It is stated in the preface of this version that it includes the most favorite stories among the two hundred and sixty-four unparalleled stories of the collection of *The Thousand and One Nights*.³⁹ Wiggin and Smith note that these stories were translated by Richard Francis Burton,⁴⁰ whose first ten volumes called *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* were published in 1885. Then between 1886 and 1888, he published *Supplemental Nights* in six volumes.

36 Ulrich Marzolph and Richard van Leeuwen, *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia* (see note 35), 731.

37 Bruce Fudge, "Signs of Scripture in 'The City of Brass,'" *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 8.1 (2006): 88–118.

38 Marina Warner, *Stranger Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012).

39 "The Story of the City of Brass" (see note 8), 6.

40 Richard Francis Burton, a British explorer, writer, Orientalist scholar, and soldier, was known for his travels and explorations in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. He was also known for his extraordinary knowledge of languages and cultures as he spoke twenty-nine languages. See Serinity Young, *Richard Francis Burton: Explorer, Scholar, Spy*. Great Explorations (New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2006), 16–26.

In his article “Literary Style and Narrative Technique in the Arabian Nights,” Daniel Beaumont affirms that Ibn Al-Nadīm⁴¹ considered the style of *The Arabian Nights* as inferior to most medieval prose works due to its simplicity. Ibn Al-Nadīm explained that unlike much medieval Arabic prose of stylists such as Al-Jāhiz, Al-Tawhīdī is dominated by *saj’*, rhymed prose. *The Arabian Nights* was written in the colloquial languages of Syria and Egypt, languages midway between a purely colloquial one and the purely literary language (*al-fusha*/ standard Arabic).⁴² The first paragraph of the story “The City of Brass” reveals its characteristic language, setting, and the structure of a story within a story:

There was, in olden time, in Damascus of Syria, a king, named Abd-El-Melik the son of Marwan; and he was sitting, one day, having with him the great men of his empire, consisting of kings and sultans, when a discussion took place among them, respecting the traditions of former nations. They called to mind the stories of Solomon, son of David, and the dominion which God had bestowed upon him over mankind, and the genies, and the birds, and the wild beasts, and they said: “We have heard from those who were before us, that God bestowed not upon any one the power which He bestowed upon Solomon, so that he used to imprison the genies and the devils in bottles of brass, and pour molten lead over them, and seal a cover over them with his signet.”⁴³

The excerpt uses simple and accessible language, but the sentences are long, compound-complex, and contain multiple linking words to add sophistication to the narrative. The paragraph consists of two sentences that intertwine different elements. It introduces the setting of ‘Damascus of Syria’ and recounts the story of Abd-El-Melik ibn Marwan, who discusses King Solomon with his men. The passage highlights Solomon’s extraordinary power, specifically his ability to ‘imprison the genies and the devils in bottles of brass.’ It also mentions the first brass object in the story. Notably, the excerpt does not identify Solomon as a prophet; rather, the characters focus on the glory of past kings, emphasizing his dominion over “genies,” “birds,” and “wild beasts.”

Although the version used in this study situates the story of *The City of Brass* in ‘Damascus of Syria,’ Gustav Roth argues that the legend cannot be confined solely to Arabic geographical fantasy. Roth proposes that the origins of the tale may actu-

41 Abū al-Faraj Muḥammad ibn Ishāq an-Nadīm (b. 320 AH/ 932 C.E.–d. 385 AH/ 995 C.E.) was a Muslim bibliographer and biographer of Baghdad; he compiled the encyclopedia *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, a collection of the literature of tenth-century Islam See J. W. Fück, “Ibn Al-Nadīm,” *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Vol. 3 (1960; Leiden and Boston: E. J. Brill, 2005), 675–76.

42 Daniel Beaumont, “Literary Style and Narrative Technique in the Arabian Nights,” *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia* (see note 35), 1.

43 “The Story of the City of Brass” (see note 8), 189.

ally lie in India⁴⁴, citing the rich tradition of similar myths in South Asian cultures. He highlights that references to ‘bronze cities’ and other fantastical urban realms are prevalent in Sanskrit literature, suggesting that the idea of such cities predates the Arabic versions and likely influenced the broader mythological framework in which the story of *The City of Brass* was later adapted. Roth’s analysis opens the possibility that the legend’s roots extend across multiple cultural traditions, blending elements from both Eastern and Western mythologies. Similarly, Ulrich Marzolph and Richard van Leeuwen state:

Other references are found in the *Abrégé des merveilles*, with its many traces of Ancient Egyptian and Coptic lore. Paul Borchardt (1927) remarks that Karkar, mentioned as the destination of the expedition, has been known from antiquity as a geographical name. It referred to a place on the North African coast, near Lebda, where in a mountainous region there were villages of caves inhabited by black tribes.⁴⁵

The quote elucidates that the tales of the *Arabian Nights* take place in different locations, and shifts appear to occur in each version. For instance, in the version by Gustav Roth, the story takes place in India and is named “The City of Bronze,” which emphasizes the fact that “the original Arabic *Arabian Nights* . . . are derived mainly from indigenous lore.”⁴⁶ These stories circulated verbally and were perceived aurally resulting in transformation in their form and geographical setting.

Commenting on the narrative tradition in Arab and Islamic world, Hasan El-Shamy states:

Three broad categories of narrative tradition may be discerned in Arab and Islamic cultures. These are (1) the formal religious-historical stories; (2) the semiliterary stories of folk extraction reworked by literate editors and redactors; and (3) true folktales in oral traditions ignored by the native elite, at least until the latter part of the twentieth century. *Alf Layla* and its contents belong to the second, the “semiliterary” category.⁴⁷

El-Shamy confirms that the stories of the *Arabian Nights* – “The City of Brass” is no exception – are not as formal as religious narratives such as the story of Solomon in Al-tha’labī’s *Qiṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā’*. The first paragraph in Al-tha’labī’s *Qiṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā’* sheds light on its historical narrative structure:

⁴⁴ Gustav Roth, “The City of Iron Indian in Ancient Indian Literature and in the Arabian Nights,” *Indian Studies: Selected Papers by Gustav Roth*, eds. Heinz Bechert and Petra Kieffer-Pülz, Bibliotheca Indo Buddhica Series, 32 (1959; New Delhi: Sri Aatguru Publications, 1986).

⁴⁵ Ulrich Marzolph and Richard van Leeuwen, “City of Brass, 180 The (Burton from the Calcutta II edition),” *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia* (see note 35), 149.

⁴⁶ Hasan El-Shamy, “The Oral Connections of the Arabian Nights” (see note 35), 9–13.

⁴⁷ Hasan El-Shamy, “The Oral Connections of the Arabian Nights” (see note 46); here 10.

The sacred text of Islam, the Qur'an, with divine revelations found in beautiful passages and in laws laid down by Allah, is also filled with stories of the lives of prophets. This present work represents one type of commentary on those Qur'anic sections, expanding the often brief and at times somewhat enigmatic aspects of those stories. Rather than a commentary, it is a collection of traditions to form a narrative whole. Its title, *Qisas al-anbiya'*, is the usual name of the Islamic literary genre that it represents, usually translated as tales, stories or legends of the prophets. The English title for this book, *Lives of the Prophets*, was chosen primarily in order to distinguish it from other works of the same genre, but also to indicate that to many Muslims these are not mere tales or legends but actual historical accounts, relating what is known about the lives of the prophets.⁴⁸

The extract shows that Al-tha'labī' relies on the Qur'an and aims to produce historical accounts about the lives of the prophets.

The first element of Al-tha'labī's narrative structure is his reliance on historians in his story of Solomon to endow it with a historical nature. To highlight Solomon's ability as a warrior, Al-tha'labī states "Muhammad b. Ishaq and other historians have said: Solomon was a very good conqueror, who rarely rested from invading."⁴⁹ For reliability, Al-tha'labī alludes to historians to depict Solomon as a conqueror. Another element of Al-tha'labī's religious narrative structure is the reference to exegetes to give the religious nature to his account. He states, "Muqatil⁵⁰ said: The devils wove for Solomon a great carpet of silk shot with gold."⁵¹ Al-tha'labī depends on a well-known exegete to highlight Solomon unrealistic and supernatural power to command the wind and control the devils.

Additionally, Al-tha'labī makes use of his introduction as a paratextual tool to send messages about his work. He said: "I studied day and night, evening and morning, with relentless determination, until God bestowed on me a knowledge that enabled me to distinguish doctrinally sound [interpretations] from devious ones, mediocre from outstanding, valid from invalid, new from old, heretical from established (*sunnah*), and cogently argued [interpretations] from poorly supported ones."⁵² In this statement, Al-tha'labī asserts that the science of Qur'an interpretation is the foundation of religion; it emphasizes the religious narrative structure.

Furthermore, Al-tha'labī uses Hebrew Scriptures: "Then God commanded Solomon to go down to the House and pray in it, and to offer a sacrifice there. The story goes that Solomon slaughtered five thousand oxen and twenty thousand ewes

48 'Arā'is Al-Majālis fi Qiṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā' OR "The Lives of the Prophets" (see note 5), 12.

49 'Arā'is Al-Majālis fi Qiṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā' OR "The Lives of the Prophets" (see note 5), 491.

50 Abū-l Ḥassan Muqātil ibn Sulaymān Al-Balkhī (d. 767 C.E.) wrote one of the earliest *tafsīr*, commentary of the Qur'an in the eighth century, and it is still available today.

51 'Arā'is Al-Majālis fi Qiṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā' OR "The Lives of the Prophets" (see note 5), 492.

52 'Arā'is Al-Majālis fi Qiṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā' OR "The Lives of the Prophets" (see note 5), 494.

at the Ka'bah."⁵³ The slaughter of a large number of oxen and ewes is mentioned in 1 Kings 8:63. Relying on the Qur'ān, Hebrew and Christian scriptures, as well as accounts from historians and exegetes, serves to inspire the piety of the masses and impart moral teachings. The combination of multi-voices in Al-tha'labī's *Qiṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā'* makes it a source of information and enlightenment, creating a new genre of homiletic storytelling that continues to exist until today.

Nevertheless, the prose style of the *Arabian Nights* is descriptive unlike the informative style of Al-tha'labī's *Qiṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā'*. "The City of Brass" includes description of people and objects encountered by the characters in their quest for the bottles in which Solomon imprisoned the jinn. Abd al-Malik ibn Marawan sends Ṭālib ibn Sahl, one of the sultans, and Amīr Mūsā ibn Nuṣayr, the governor of the Maghreb, to hunt for some bottles for him to see the ancient screaming jinn. However, Ṭālib and Mūsā do not know how to get them nor where to go. Therefore, they seek the help of the elderly Sheikh Abd-Es-Samad, who gravely informs them that the journey through the desert is long and perilous; it could take years. Searching the abandoned cities, they find inscriptions in deserted palaces saying that these places have witnessed the glory of Kush ibn Shaddad ibn Ad known as 'the great.' In one palace, they discover an embalmed lady described as follows:

And in the midst of that dome was a great dome-crowned structure of alabaster, around which were lattice windows, decorated, and adorned with oblong emeralds, such as none of the kings could procure. In it was a pavilion of brocade, raised upon columns of red gold, and within this were birds, the feet of which were of emeralds; beneath each bird was a net of brilliant pearls, spread over a fountain; and by the brink of the fountain was placed a couch adorned with pearls and jewels and jacinths, whereon was a damsel resembling the shining sun. Eyes had not beheld one more beautiful. Upon her was a garment of brilliant pearls, on her head was a crown of red gold, with a fillet of jewels, on her neck was a necklace of jewels in the middle of which were refulgent gems, and upon her forehead were two jewels the light of which was like that of the sun; and she seemed as though she were looking at the people, and observing them to the right and left. When the Emeer Moosa beheld this damsel, he wondered extremely at her loveliness, and was confounded by her beauty and the redness of her cheeks and the blackness of her hair. Any beholder would imagine that she was alive, and not dead.

The excerpt describes the place in which the explorers find the embalmed lady, lying on a couch decorated with jewels. She is compared to the shining sun, and it is mentioned that her beauty is incomparable. The sentences include prepositional phrases such as "in the midst," "around," "upon," "within," "beneath," "by," "over," "with," and "on" to give the position of the described objects. The sentences also involve adjectives such as "great," "decorated," "adorned," "brilliant," "shining,"

53 *'Arā'is Al-Majālis fi Qiṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā'* OR "The Lives of the Prophets" (see note 5), 497.

“alive,” and “dead.” These adjectives depict the lady as the most beautiful woman that eyes can behold. The illustration below shows the mummified lady, whose description in the text is more picturesque:



The City of Brass: The Company Finds the Dead Queen, by Fernand Schulz-Wettel (Berlin: Neufeld and Henius, 1914)

Fig. 1: The Company discovers the lifeless body of the queen in the decaying grandeur of the City of Brass, a moment of awe and dread that signifies the end of an era.⁵⁴

Fig. 1 shows the men who are roaming the City of Brass, filled with riches and goods. The young woman is on a couch. The description in the text gives more

⁵⁴ Fernand Schulz-Wettel, *The City of Brass: The Company Finds the Dead Queen* (see note 8), 147.

mental visuals by elaborating that she is bordered by two copper statues of slaves and adding that before the throne is a tablet informing the men that she is “Tedmur, the daughter of the King of the Amalekites. [She] possessed what none of the kings possessed, and ruled with justice, and acted impartially toward [her] subjects.”⁵⁵ Suddenly famine struck and all the wealth of the city could not save the people. It is written on the tablet that visitors can take what they want from the jewels, yet they are not allowed to take the queen’s attire. When Ṭālib does not consider the warning and comes closer to the queen’s body, the copper statues execute him at once.

In addition to the depiction of the embalmed lady, the description of Solomon’s throne in the two accounts highlights the difference between the religious-historical narrative structure of Al-tha’labī’s *Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā’* and the fantastical narrative structure of “The City of Brass.” Table 1 below shows an illustration:

Tab. 1: The Description of Solomon’s Throne in the Two Accounts.

Solomon’s Throne in the Two Narratives	
Al-Tha’labī’s <i>Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā’</i>	“The City of Brass”
<p>Muqātil said: The devils wove for Solomon a great carpet of silk shot with gold, a parasang long and a parasang wide; and a gold platform was placed for him in the midst of the carpet. Then he sat upon it, with three thousand chairs of gold and silver around him. The prophets sat on the golden chairs and the learned men on the silver chairs. Around them were the people, and around the people were the jinn and the devils. Birds shaded them from the sunlight with their wings. The breeze carried the carpet between morning and evening for a distance of a month’s journey, and for a distance of a month’s journey from evening till morning.⁵⁶</p>	<p>The Prophet of God . . . prepared his forces, consisting of genies and men, and wild beasts, and birds and reptiles . . . and of the devils, six-hundred millions. He mounted, with his forces, upon the magic carpet, with the birds flying over his head, and the wild beasts beneath the carpet marching. . . Then Solomon set for himself a couch of alabaster adorned with jewels, and plated with plates of red gold, and he placed his vizier Asaf on the right side, and his vizier, Ed-Dimiryat, on the left side, and the kings of mankind on his right, and the kings of the genies on his left, and the wild beasts and the vipers and serpents before him.⁵⁷</p>

The extract taken from Al-tha’labī’s *Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā’* comes under the title “A Chapter About the Kinds of Virtues, Talents and Other Things with Which God Endowed His Prophet Solomon When He Made Him King.” In this section it is explained that

⁵⁵ “The Story of the City of Brass” (see note 8), 200.

⁵⁶ *Arā’is Al-Majālis fī Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā’* OR “The Lives of the Prophets” (see note 5), 492.

⁵⁷ “The Story of the City of Brass” (see note 8), 189.

“Whenever Solomon] heard of a king in any part of the world, he would come to him, weaken him, and subdue him. When he wished to go on a raid, he would issue orders to his camp.”⁵⁸ Whenever he wanted anything, “he gave a command to the violent wind” and brought what he desired. Al-tha’labī refers to the Qur’an saying that the journey that could take months Solomon did on one day: “To Solomon We subdued the wind travelling a month’s journey morning and evening.” (Q 34:12). The excerpt contains another reference to the Historian Muqatil, giving description of Solomon’s throne, such as being a parasang (5.5 km) wide and similarly long, made of silk embroidered with gold, having golden chairs, and surrounded by prophets, learned men, and the jinn.

The extract from “The City of Brass” is preceded by the story of the *Ifrit* Dahish, son of Al-A’amash, who is imprisoned in a black-stone pillar due to being the guardian of an idol of red carnelian and supporting the king of the land who refuses to have his daughter marry Solomon since she loves the idol. The king listens to the *Ifrit*’s advice and beats Solomon’s messenger; then he sends him back to Solomon. The extract describes Solomon’s throne which moves with him in his journey to fight the king. In “The City of Brass,” the carpet is described as a “magic with flying birds.”⁵⁹ The use of prepositional phrases of position (e.g., on the right and on the left) helps the reader visualize the throne and enriches the description.

The story of marrying the king’s daughter alludes to the story of Solomon’s marriage to Pharaoh’s daughter as mentioned in 1 Kings 3: 1, which says: “Solomon made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt; he took Pharaoh’s daughter, and brought her into the city of David, until he had finished building his own house, and the house of the Lord and the wall around Jerusalem.” This allusion mingles reality with imagination, which is an element of the narrative structure of “The City of Brass.” Another comparative analysis of the two texts can highlight the implementation of magical realism in “The City of Brass,” which blends fantastical elements with reality, and blurs the line between what is real and what is imagined, to create a sense of fascination. The extract below demonstrates the depiction of the *Ifrit* in the two texts:

58 *‘Arā’is Al-Majālis fi Qiṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā’* OR “The Lives of the Prophets” (see note 5), 492.

59 “The Story of the City of Brass,” (see note 8), 189.

Tab. 2: The Description of the *Ifrit* in the Two Tales.

The <i>Ifrit</i> in the Two Tales	
Al-Tha'labī's <i>Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā'</i>	"The City of Brass"
Solomon said to him [Sakhr the <i>'Ifrit</i> , who dwelt on an island]: "Were your rebellion against me and your failure to render obedience to me not enough for you, that you also had to scoff at people?" ⁶⁰	I am an efreet of the genies, and my name is Dahish, and I am restrained here by the majesty of God." . . . Sheikh Abd-Es-Samad said [to the efreet]: "Are there in this place any of the efreets confined in bottles of brass from the time of Solomon?" He answered: "Yes, in the Sea of El-Karkar, where are a people of the descendants of Noah, whose country the deluge reached not, and they are separated there from the rest of the sons of Adam." ⁶¹

In Tab. 2, the extract from Al-Tha'labī's *Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā'* reveals that the name of the jinn is "Sakhr," dwelling on an island, rebelling against Solomon, and mocking people. the name of the jinn is not mentioned in the Qur'ān; however, it is stated in Tafsir al-Qurtubi that Solomon took Sakhr, the one who had taken his ring, put him in a rock blocked with another, bound it with iron and lead, sealed it with his seal and threw it into the sea.⁶² The excerpt shows that the jinn is imprisoned for being rebellious and disobedient.

The excerpt from "The City of Brass" demonstrates a combination of realistic and imaginative elements. It echoes the imprisonment of the jinn as cited by exegetes; nonetheless, the "efreet," jinni, kept in stone says that other "efreets" are confined in bottles of brass. This expansion serves as a fantastical idea of the captivity of the jinn. The quote shows that sheikh Es-Samad is given a supernatural ability to talk to a jinni. It also represents some factual names such as the names "Karkar" and "Noah." The first name refers to an ancient castle located on the river northwest of Ḥamāh, in western Syria. However, it is described as a sea in the narrative, where the quest can be achieved, as this sea is said to contain the brass bottles in which the jinn are imprisoned. The second name alludes to the Prophet Noah, and this reference may serve to lend a sense of realism to the quest and the existence of the brass bottles that the protagonists seek. The mention of Noah's story also suggests that the flood did not reach the people of this 'country,' who are 'separated from the rest of the sons of Adam.'⁶³ This element of narrative structure contributes to the fantastical nature of the Arabian tale by enhancing the themes of magic,

⁶⁰ 'Arā'is Al-Majālis fi Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā' OR "The Lives of the Prophets" (see note 5), 517.

⁶¹ "The Story of the City of Brass" (see note 8), 195, 199.

⁶² Shams Al-Din Muhammad bin Ahmed Al-Ansari al-Qurtubi, *Tafsir Al-Qurtubi*, (Islamweb.net, n.d.); 180; online at: <https://shorturl.at/PLWoo> (last accessed on July 7, 2024).

⁶³ "The Story of the City of Brass" (see note 8), 192.

adventure, and exploration. This structure immerses readers in worlds where anything is possible and where reality is malleable.

Overall, Solomon's story remains a powerful example in literary contexts, including religious, historical, and social ones. It continues to inspire reflection and interpretation across different cultures and beliefs. The narrative structure of Al-Tha'labī's text blends historical details with religious teachings to convey moral lessons about wisdom, faith, miraculous power, justice, and the consequences of human actions. On the other hand, the narrative structure of "The City of Brass" is fantastical; it is based on the quest that all events are around. The elements of this structure are the lively description and magic realism.

The Portrayal of Solomon in Al-Tha'labī's *Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā'* and Solomonic Motifs in "The City of Brass"

Even though Solomon has been mentioned explicitly at the beginning of the tale "The City of Brass," the Solomonic motifs are recurrent providing a wide range of effects. Perceiving these allusions can impact not only the readers' enjoyment of the narrative but also their realization of the miracles in Solomon's story, which are obviously presented in Al-Tha'labī's *Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā'*. In this section, I argue that Al-Tha'labī's *Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā'* and "The City of Brass" utilize the themes of wisdom, power, and justice. These recurring themes and motifs serve the purpose of preaching in Al-Tha'labī's *Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā'* and give unity and narrative depth to "The City of Brass."

One of the key themes in "The City of Brass" is the perilous quest, which involves magical encounters. This theme reflects the adventurous spirit prevalent in many tales in the *Arabian Nights* collection. The text features an extraordinary journey as the protagonists, Ṭālib, Mūsā, and Sheikh Abd-Es-Samad, seek the bottles of brass, in which Solomon imprisons the rebellious jinn. In their quest they encounter strange creatures, such as the demon imprisoned in a pillar of black stone. The demon is described as follows:

a person sunk to his armpits, and he had two huge wings, and four arms; two of them like those of the sons of Adam, and two like the fore-legs of lions, with claws. He had hair upon his head like the tails of horses, and two eyes like two burning coals, and he had a third eye, in his forehead, like the eye of the lynx, from which there appeared sparks of fire. He was black and tall.⁶⁴

64 Kate Douglas Wiggin and Nora A. Smith, ed., "The Story of the City of Brass" (see note 8), 194.

The quote depicts the demon as a black and tall supernatural creature with enormous wings, four arms: two-human-like and two-lion-like. He also has long hair, three eyes: two-human-like and one-lynx-like in his forehead. His eyes are ‘sparks of fire’. This fantasy description gives the narrative more extraordinary elements to be classified as a fantasy with amazing and abnormal characters. The demon is an *efreet* (a powerful, malevolent spirit in Arabic folklore and Islamic mythology) of the jinn, and his name is Dahish, the son of Al-A’mash. The vocabulary used to describe this character as one of the wonders is similar to that commonly used in the tales of the *Arabian Nights* collection.⁶⁵ These wonders are derived from miracles in the Qur’ān and implemented to send moral messages.

It is not mentioned in the Qur’ān that Solomon imprisoned the jinn in brass bottles, but the story of how Solomon punished the rebellious demons or jinn is derived in part from Q 34:12–13, which Al-Tha’labī mentions in his text:

وَلِسَالِمِينَ الْريِّحِ عُذُوها شَهْرٌ وَرَواحِها شَهْرٌ وَأَسَلنا لَهُ عَيْنَ الْبَطْرِ وَمِنَ الْجِنِّ مَن يَعْمَلُ بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ بِإِذْنِ رَبِّهِ وَمَن يَزِغْ مِنْهُمْ عَنْ أَمْرنا نُذِقْهُ مِنْ عَذابِ السَّعِيرِ (سبا ١٢)

[God has said: And to Solomon We subjected the wind: its morning stride was a month’s journey and so was its evening stride. And We caused a stream of molten copper to flow for him, and ‘We subjected’ some of the jinn to work under him by his Lord’s Will. And whoever of them deviated from Our command, We made them taste the torment of the blaze.⁶⁶]

Al-Tha’labī uses Q 34:12–13 to emphasize the miracles of Solomon and his ability to command winds and the jinn. The verse says that the jinn who do not obey Solomon are tormented. The motif of Solomon’s command to the wind can be recalled in Ṭālib ibn Sahl’s recounts of the journey to Karkar where the wind (*rih*) has sent the sailors to a place extremely far away beyond India. The demon is imprisoned in the black stone pillar and sealed with Solomon’s ring because he has been the guard of an idol and advised a king to fight against Solomon, who has proposed the king’s daughter and demanded that his kingdom give up the worship of idols. Thus, the miracle that Al-Tha’labī refers to in his book is Solomon’s commanding the jinn, while the wonder in “The City of Brass” is his punishment of the demon and imprisoning him in the black stone pillar.

Another wonder that the party encounter in their quest is the city of brass with its walls of black magnetic stone. When the group reaches the walls, they find no visible gate. The Shaykh recalls that it is said “in the Book of Hidden Treasures that it hath five and twenty gates and that none of its gates may be opened but

65 Bruce Fudge, “Signs of Scripture in ‘The City of Brass’” (see note 9), 88.

66 ‘*Arā’is Al-Majālis fi Qiṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā’* OR “The Lives of the Prophets” (see note 5), 492.

from within the city.”⁶⁷ The motif of “the mysterious walled city” is common in the *Arabian Nights* collection.⁶⁸ Christa A. Tuczay states that the motif of the walled city is “intended to be a striking allegorical symbol of the world’s vanity.”⁶⁹ In “The City of Brass,” the protagonists “saw a door inlaid with ivory and ebony, and adorned with plates of brilliant gold. Over it was hung a curtain of silk . . . and upon it were locks of white silver, to be opened by artifice, without a key.”⁷⁰

This motif is recurrent in “The City of Brass” to enrich the narrative by evoking specific themes. In the narrative, the mysteriously enwalled city is concealed within the desert, guarded by supernatural forces and mystical barriers, making it a place of mystery and intrigue. These elements enhance the theme of magical power. For example, in one chamber in the walled city, the party find a mummified queen, bejeweled and wearing a precious amulet. Although she is dead, her eyes blink and her eyelashes move. Her eyeballs have been removed after her death, quicksilver has been put under them, and then they were reinserted. The human-like corpus is guarded by two copper statues of armed slaves standing at her sides. Before the two slaves was a gold tablet on which was the inscription below:

I am Tadmurah, Princess of the Amalekites. This city is my city. O you who have come so far, take all which pleases you; but ah, beware! if my beauty and your lust draw you to lay a violating hand on me!⁷¹

Despite the warning in the inscription, Ṭālib ibn Sahl has attempted to steal the jewels; he has fallen victim to his greed. As a result, once he makes a move for Tadmurah, the guards cut him right down, strike him in the back, and chop off his head. Ṭālib loses his life as a result of his succumbence to greed; this dire consequence underscores the importance of moderation, humility, and ethical behavior in the face of temptation and desire for material gain. Thus, the magical elements of the copper statues that kill whoever attempts to steal the wealth of the human-like corpus invites readers to explore more themes and reflect on the boundaries between the mundane and the magical.

The two statues that guard the corpse of Queen Tadmura recall the two lions that flanked Solomon’s throne. According to Al-Tha’labī, the throne of Solomon was sur-

⁶⁷ “The Story of the City of Brass” (see note 8); here 200.

⁶⁸ Christa A. Tuczay, “Motifs in the Arabian Nights and in Ancient and Medieval European Literature” (see note 11), 272.

⁶⁹ Christa A. Tuczay, “Motifs in the Arabian Nights and in Ancient and Medieval European Literature” (see note 11), 283.

⁷⁰ “The Story of the City of Brass” (see note 8), 205.

⁷¹ “The Story of the City of Brass” (see note 8), 207.

rounded by two lions, which spread their paws for Solomon to ascend.⁷² Al-Tha'labī states that the lions of gold guard the throne, and when Nebuchadnezzar, the second king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, takes it to Antioch, the golden guardians (the two lions) struck and wounded him. The allusion to Solomon's throne implies judgment and enriches the reader's understanding through shared cultural knowledge.

Another allusion to Solomon is the name of the mummified queen, 'Tadmura,' which recalls the name of 'Tadmur' city. According to Bruce Fudge, ancient Judaic and Arabic legends refer to 'Tadmur' as a city built by Solomon (see section II).⁷³ Tadmur, known as Palmyra, was an ancient city located in present-day Syria. In biblical and historical accounts, King Solomon is not specifically linked to the city of Tadmur unlike his reign which is often referenced in the broader contexts of ancient Near Eastern history and culture. The allusion to the city of Tadmur and naming the embalmed queen 'Tadmura' highlight the brevity of human existence as both the city and queen vanished.⁷⁴

Furthermore, the story about the war between Solomon and the king whose daughter is proposed by Solomon can make the reader recall Solomon's supernatural ability in fighting, which Al-tha'labī's depicts as follows:

Muhammad b. Ishaq and other historians have said: Solomon was a very good conqueror; who rarely rested from invading. Whenever he heard of a king in any part of the world he would come to him, weaken him, and subdue him. When he wished to go on a raid, he would issue orders to his camp, and some wood would be cut on which his throne was erected. Then people, and beasts of burden, and all the materiel of war would be loaded upon it.⁷⁵

The quote presents Solomon as a warrior who conquered enemies in battles and "rarely rested from invading." It shows his invasions to kingdoms whose rulers were idolatrous; Solomon's army comprised people, beasts, birds, and an army of jinn. Both Al-Tha'labī and "The City of Brass" emphasize Solomon's wars against unbelievers. The motif of the floor glazed as water in both narratives recalls the story of Bilqīs, the Queen of Sheba in Q 27: 44. Based on *tafsīr* (exegesis) of Ibn Kathīr, in the Qur'ān, Sulaymān (Solomon) is told by a hoopoe that a woman rules a large kingdom, whose subjects worship the Sun.⁷⁶ Aiming to have them believe in the one true God, Solomon sends a letter with the hoopoe to Bilqīs, the Queen

72 Abu Al-Qasim Mahmud ibn Umar Al-Zamakhshari, *Al-Kashshaf*, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dar Al-Kutub Al-Talimiyya, 1995), 557.

73 Bruce Fudge, "Signs of Scripture in 'The City of Brass'" (see note 9), 92.

74 Andras Hamori, *On the Art of Medieval Arabic Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), here 145.

75 *'Arā'is Al-Majālis fī Qiṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā'* OR "The Lives of the Prophets" (see note 5), 491.

76 Imād Al-Dīn Abū'l Fidā' Ismā'il ibn Umar Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān Al-'Aẓīm* [The interpretation of the Qur'ān]. Vol. 1 (Damascus: Maktabat Dār al-Fihā', 1998), 19–22.

of Sheba,⁷⁷ bidding her to come to him. When she consults her viziers, they advise her to wage war against Solomon; however, she decides to appease him by sending gifts. Solomon rejects the gifts. Knowing that she is making her way to him in submission. Solomon miraculously transports her throne to him, yet he has rearranged the jewels of her throne. When she arrives, he asks her if her throne is similar to the one that she has. She says, “(It is) as though it were the very same.”⁷⁸ Using his supernatural abilities bestowed upon him by God, Solomon builds a palace of glass with water running under it. Table 3 below shows that the motif of the glazed floor in “The City of Brass” recalls Solomon’s miraculous throne:

Tab. 3: The Motif of the Glazed Floor in the Qur’ān and the Two Accounts.

Qur’ān 27: 44	Al-Tha’labī’s <i>Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā’</i>	“The City of Brass”
<p>It was said to her: “Enter <i>As-Sarh</i>” (a glass surface with water underneath it or a palace): but when she saw it, she thought it was a pool, and she (tucked up her clothes) uncovering her legs. Sulaimān (Solomon) said: “Verily, it is a <i>Sarh</i> (a glass surface with water underneath it or a palace).” She said: “My Lord! Verily, I have wronged myself, and I submit in Islām, together with Sulaimān (Solomon) to Allāh, the Lord of the <i>‘Ālamīn</i> (mankind, jinn and all that exists).”⁷⁹</p>	<p>When she came to Solomon it was also said to her: “Enter the pavilion.” (27:44) That was because Solomon, when Bilqis drew near, had issued orders to the devils, and they had built for him a palatial pavilion of glass, clear as water, and had made water flow beneath it, and had placed fish in the water. Then he placed his throne above it, and sat upon it, and the birds, the jinn, and the human beings crowded around him.⁸⁰</p>	<p>They then passed on, and found a saloon constructed of polished marble adorned with jewels. The beholder imagined that upon its floor was running water, and if any one walked upon it he would slip.⁸¹</p>

⁷⁷ The story of the Queen of Sheba is mentioned in the three Abrahamic religions. It is preserved in 1 Kings x. 1–13, 2 Chronicles ix. 1–12 and the Qur’ān 27: 21–23, 41–44. There is an intertextual relation of the Qur’ān and the Bible in representing the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. In the Qur’ān, Solomon is a Prophet, while in the Bible he is a King. The hoopoe bird and the letter from Solomon to Bilquis, the Queen of Sheba, are not mentioned in the Bible. (see Sardar Muhammad, Saad Jaffar, Noor Fatima, and Syed Ghazanfar Ahmed, “The Story of Sulaiman (Solomon) and Asia Mukhtar, Bilquis (Sheba): Affinities in Quranic and Biblical Versions,” *Journal of Legal, Ethical and Regulatory Issues* 25.6 (2022): 1–9.

⁷⁸ Muḥammad Taqī-ud Dīn al-Hilālī and Muḥammad Muḥsin Khān, *Translation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur’an into the English Language*. (Al-Madīnah Al-Munawwarah: King Fahd Glorious Qur’ān Printing Complex, 2020), 653.

⁷⁹ Muḥammad Taqī-ud Dīn al-Hilālī and Muḥammad Muḥsin Khān, *Translation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur’an into the English Language* (see note 78), 653.

⁸⁰ *‘Arā’is Al-Majālis fi Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā’* OR “The Lives of the Prophets” (see note 5), 534.

⁸¹ “The Story of the City of Brass” (see note 8), 205.

Tab. 3 illustrates that the three sources depict the floor of “glass, clear as water.” The Qur’ānic verse reveals that Bilqīs, the Queen of Sheba, has confused the glass surface of the floor of the palace with water, so when Bilqīs is asked to enter it, she bares her legs, yet Solomon tells her that his throne is built on “a palatial pavilion of glass,” transparent as water. The table demonstrates Al-Tha’labī’s emphasis on the miracle of Solomon’s command on devils, birds, and the jinn along with his throne. It reveals that Solomon orders the creatures that he commands to build him a palace with glassy floor with water and fish underneath. Furthermore, Tab. 3 shows the allusion to the miracle of Solomon’s throne in “The City of Brass.” Much like the Queen of Sheba, the characters in the tale mistake the palace floor for water, fearing they might slip as they walk across it. The series of Solomonic motifs gives unity to the text.

Thus, the recurrent allusions to Solomon’s miracles add depth, symbolism, and cultural resonance to the narrative. These miracles serve as plot devices, elements that drive the storyline forward. The protagonists’ quest to find the brass bottles in which Solomon imprisons the jinn forms the central plot of “The City of Brass.” The references to the miracles of Solomon’s throne, the city of “Tadmur”, and the Queen of Shiba serve as powerful literary devices that enhance the themes of wisdom, power, judgment, and historical and cultural richness. These miracles are meant for preaching and highlighting the divine power in Al-Tha’labī’s *Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā’* and to entertain the reader and enhance the fabulousness of the fantastical text in “The City of Brass.” Most importantly, they function as a tool to enhance morals such as the horrible consequence of greediness and idolatry.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to elucidate the nuanced differences and striking similarities between the portrayals of Solomon in Al-Tha’labī’s *Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā’* and “The City of Brass,” a tale from the *Arabian Nights* collection. The comparative analysis of these narratives reveals that both accounts focus on Solomon’s miracles; however, they diverge significantly in their narrative structures and textual representation of Solomon. Al-Tha’labī depicts Solomon’s miracles explicitly through applying a religious-historical structure, whereas “The City of Brass” implements a fantastical structure. Al-tha’alibī comprises verses from the Qur’ān, historical accounts, and exegetical resources to highlight Solomon’s extraordinary powers by virtue of commanding the wind, birds, and the jinn. On the other hand, “The City of Brass” comprises elements of fantasy such as lively description, a series of motifs, and magical realism.

Al-tha‘ālibī’s text sends prophetic messages to serve as potent literary devices that add layers of meaning and thematic exploration. These messages are Solomon’s wisdom, the divine approval of his reign, and the obedience to God’s commands. They help represent the large themes of wisdom and divine power through providing a metaphorical layer that allows a deeper interpretation of Solomon’s miracles. The prophetic messages also draw on cultural and mythological traditions through the stories of places such as Jerusalem and Mekkah along with people such as Pharaoh and Balqis. Furthermore, these messages evoke a sense of history, tradition, and supernatural belief systems that shape the reader’s understanding. The recurrent Solomonic motifs in “The City of Brass” form the rich tapestry of thematic elements, give the narrative unity, and send moralistic messages.

The allusion to Solomon recalls his supernatural power over other creatures. It also reminds the reader of the ancient city of Palmyra, called “Tadmur,” and the story of the Queen of Sheba. This thread of motifs gives the text unity since the plot is based on the main characters’ quest to find the bottles of brass, in which Solomon imprisoned the jinn. In their exploration, the protagonists encounter real and imaginary characters and places that familiarize the reader with Solomon’s miracles leading to moral lessons about righteousness, the consequence of greediness, and human perishing before the eternal power of God. Hence, the repeated motifs function as the skeleton of the narrative.

In conclusion, the relevance of miracles in Al-Tha‘ālibī’s *Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā’* and “The City of Brass,” a tale from the *Arabian Nights* collection lies in their roles as narrative devices that convey moral, cultural, and religious themes. These miracles not only entertain but also educate and inspire reflection on human nature, divine power, and the ethical choices individuals face. They contribute to the broader tapestry of Islamic and Arabian literature, enriching cultural understanding and appreciation through emphasizing moral teachings for believers in Al-Tha‘ālibī’s *Qīṣaṣ Al-Anbiyā’* and illustrating the interplay between history, legend, and faith in “The City of Brass.”

