

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF *TAFSIR AL- TABARI* AND GINZBERG'S *THE LEGENDS OF THE JEWS* ON PROPHET IBRAHIM (PBUH)'S FIERY FURNACE MIRACLE NARRATIVES

Muhammad Ahmad Ibrahim AlJahsh

College of Sharia and Islamic Studies. Al Qasimia
University. Sharjah. 63000. United Arab Emirates.

Email:
mibrahim@alqasimia.
ac.ae

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Abstract

This study investigates the narratives of Prophet Ibrahim's Fiery Furnace Miracle in Islamic and Jewish traditions, focusing on *Tafsir al-Tabari* and Ginzberg's *The Legends of the Jews*. Through a comparative and analytical approach, the research aims to identify similarities and differences in the theological precepts and ethical lessons presented in these sources as well as explore the potential influence of Islamic sources on Ginzberg's work. The findings reveal that the Qur'anic narrative, as elucidated in *Tafsir al-Tabari*, maintains its superiority by presenting a concise and focused account of the events, emphasizing the core message of faith, trust in God, and submission to His will. The study also investigates the interconnectedness of religious traditions, highlighting the significance of historical and cultural contexts in shaping religious narratives. The results highlight the potential of comparative studies to foster a greater understanding and appreciation of narratives shared between faiths, and they emphasize the importance of recognizing the interconnectedness of religious traditions in promoting interfaith dialogue and cooperation.

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Keywords: Fiery Furnace Miracle; *Tafsir al-Tabari*; Ginzberg's *The Legends of the Jews*; Prophet Ibrahim (AS); theological reflections; ethical lessons; interfaith dialogue.

Khulasah

Makalah ini mengkaji naratif Mukjizat Peleburan Api Nabi Ibrahim (AS) dalam tradisi Islam dan Yahudi, dengan tumpuan kepada karya al-Tabari iaitu *Tafsir al-Tabari* dan *The Legends of the Jews* oleh Ginzberg. Dengan pendekatan analisis perbandingan, kajian ini bertujuan menghuraikan persamaan dan perbezaan doktrin teologi dan ajaran etika yang terkandung dalam kedua-dua sumber tersebut, serta mengeksplorasi pengaruh tradisi Islam terhadap karya Ginzberg. Hasil kajian ini menegaskan bahwa penceritaan al-Qur'an, sebagaimana diinterpretasikan dalam *Tafsir al-Tabari*, menonjol kerana kejelasan dan fokusnya yang kuat, menekankan dasar keimanan, kepercayaan pada Allah, dan ketundukan kepada kehendak-Nya. Penulisan ini juga menyingkap keterkaitan antara-tradisi agama, menunjukkan betapa pentingnya konteks pensejarahan dan budaya dalam membentuk naratif keagamaan. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan kajian perbandingan dapat meningkatkan kefahaman dan penghargaan terhadap penceritaan yang berbeza, serta menekankan pentingnya mengakui keterkaitan antara-tradisi agama dalam mendukung dialog dan kerjasama antara agama.

Kata kunci: Mukjizat peleburan api; *Tafsir al-Tabari*; *The Legends of the Jews*; Ginzberg; Nabi Ibrahim; refleksi teologis; ajaran etika; dialog antara agama.

Introduction

The story of Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) (PBUH), and 'the fiery furnace miracle' has been a subject of interest and fascination within various religious traditions, particularly Islam and Judaism. This narrative illustrates the unwavering faith of Prophet Ibrahim in the face of adversity and the divine protection he received due to his devotion to

God. Valuable insights into theological and ethical concepts that inform these two traditions emerge from this story.

This study aims to comparatively analyse the narratives of 'the fiery furnace miracle' in *Tafsir al-Tabari*, an influential Islamic exegetical work, and in Ginzberg's *The Legends of the Jews*, a comprehensive collection of Jewish legends and stories. By examining the similarities and differences between these two sources, the study seeks to explore shared themes, theological reflections, and ways in which these narratives have been shaped by their respective historical and cultural contexts. This study also investigates the interconnectedness of the two religious traditions, including the possibility of Islamic influence on Ginzberg's work, to foster a greater understanding and appreciation of their shared narratives and themes.

Tafsir al-Tabari, also known as *Jami' al-Bayan 'an Ta'wil al-Qur'an*, is a pivotal work in Qur'anic exegesis by the eminent 9th-century scholar Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari. Recognized for its comprehensive and authoritative analysis, this *tafsir* is a cornerstone of Islamic scholarship.¹ The significance of al-Tabari's work is highlighted by Abu Hamid al-Isfarayini's remark that a journey to China for its acquisition would be justified.² Ibn Khuzaymah also lauded the work's depth, acknowledging al-Tabari's unparalleled knowledge.³

Al-Tabari's expertise extended beyond *tafsir* into fields such as *fiqh*, *hadith* and linguistics, with Abu 'Ali al-

¹ Mustafa Shah, "al-Tabari and the Dynamics of *Tafsir*: Theological Dimensions of a Legacy," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 15(2) (2013), 83-139.

² Ibn 'Imad al-Hanbali, *Shadharat al-Dhahab fi Akhbar man Dhahab*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dar Ibn Kathir, 2016), 260.

³ Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan 'an Ta'wil Ay al-Qur'an (Tafsir al-Tabari)*, vol. 1, ed. 'Abd Allah ibn 'Abd al-Muhsin al-Turki (Cairo: Dar Hijr, 1997), 4.

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Ahwazi noting his prolific contributions in these areas.⁴ Al-Dhahabi further commended al-Tabari as a trustworthy scholar and a leading figure in various Islamic sciences.⁵

Tafsir al-Tabari distinguishes itself by its comprehensive incorporation of *hadith* and *Isra'iliyyat*, employing these narratives to enrich the historical, linguistic and theological understanding of Qur'anic texts.⁶ Among the various narratives analysed, the *tafsir* offers a profound exploration of the fiery furnace miracle involving Prophet Ibrahim (PBUH), particularly within the context of Qur'anic verses from al-Anbiya' (21:51-70), al-'Ankabut (29:24) and al-Saffat (37:83-98).⁷

The Legends of the Jews is a comprehensive collection of Jewish legends compiled by the prominent 20th-century scholar Louis Ginzberg. Spanning seven volumes, this work presents Jewish legends from biblical, apocryphal and rabbinic sources, offering readers a unique insight into the rich tapestry of Jewish narrative tradition. In Ginzberg's work, the story of Prophet Ibrahim's fiery furnace miracle is found within the context of the Jewish tradition's broader understanding of Abraham's life. Drawing from various sources, including the *Midrash* and *Talmud*, Ginzberg presents a multifaceted account of the event, highlighting themes such as the power of faith, divine intervention, and the nature of God's covenant with Abraham.⁸

⁴ 'Ali al-Ahwazi, *Yaqut al-Hamawi, Mu'jam al-Udaba*, vol. 16 (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1993), 14.

⁵ Al-Dhahabi, *Siyar A'lam al-Nubala*, vol. 2 (Beirut: al-Risalah Publishers, 1984), 271.

⁶ George Saliba & Franz Rosenthal, eds., *The History of al-Tabari (Tarikh al-Rusul wa'l-Muluk): An Annotated Translation*, Vol. XXXV and XXXVIII (Albany: State University of New York Press).

⁷ Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters, Volume II: The House of 'Imran* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1984).

⁸ Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, trans. Henrietta Szold, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1909-1938), 196-203.

The paper begins by outlining the main research question guiding it and the background to the two sources analysed. Following this, it examines previous research on *Tafsir al-Tabari* and Ginzberg's *The Legends of the Jews*, as well as other miracle narratives in Islamic and Jewish traditions. The methodology section presents the approach taken, while subsequent sections explore the background of Prophet Ibrahim (PBUH) and the fiery furnace miracle in Islamic and Jewish traditions, the similarities and differences in the narratives and the implications of these findings for interfaith dialogue. The study concludes with a summary of the results and recommendations for further research.

Literature Review

The scholarly discourse surrounding *Tafsir al-Tabari* and Ginzberg's *The Legends of the Jews* is extensive and encompasses a wide array of analytical lenses, underscoring the seminal role these texts play within Islamic and Jewish intellectual traditions. John Wansbrough, in his seminal work *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, discusses the intricacies of al-Tabari's hermeneutical strategies, shedding light on how these approaches have sculpted the contours of Islamic exegetical tradition.⁹ Conversely, Claude Gilliot's exploration, *Exegesis of the Qur'an: Early Schools*, presents a critique of al-Tabari's engagement with *Isra'iliyyat*. Gilliot articulates concerns regarding the incorporation of these narratives, questioning the implications for the purity of Islamic exegesis and the challenges posed by the integration of external sources.¹⁰

⁹ John E. Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

¹⁰ Claude Gilliot, "Exegesis of the Qur'an: Early Schools," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, ed. Jane McAuliffe, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 99–112.

Christine Hayes positions Ginzberg's *The Legends of the Jews* as a pivotal bridge between scholarly writing and traditional Jewish narrative, underscoring its pivotal role in shaping contemporary Jewish studies and highlighting its integrative approach to the Jewish textual tradition.¹¹ Galit Hasan-Rokem's scholarship sheds light on the intrinsic value of Ginzberg's compilation in elucidating the relationship between folklore and *Midrash* within Rabbinic literature. Hasan-Rokem's insights reveal how Ginzberg's anthology is a crucial conduit for exploring the historical and cultural layers woven into Jewish folk narratives, thereby enriching our understanding of their evolution and significance.¹²

Miracle narratives play a significant role in both Islamic and Jewish religious traditions, often serving as the foundation for theological and ethical reflections. In the Islamic tradition, miracles, known as *mu'jizat*, are extraordinary events performed by the prophets as evidence of their divine mission and the truth of their message.¹³ The Qur'an contains numerous accounts of miracles performed by various prophets, including Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. These miracles serve to demonstrate God's omnipotence, the authenticity of the prophetic message and the necessity of belief and obedience to the divine will.¹⁴

¹¹ Christine Hayes, "Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews*: Its History, Significance, and Impact," in *The Cambridge Guide to Jewish History, Religion, and Culture*, ed. Judith Baskin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 389–392.

¹² Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Web of Life: Folklore and Midrash in Rabbinic Literature* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2000), 42.

¹³ Dewi Suriyani Djamdjuri, "The Miracles of al-Quran: Al-Quran as a Grace and Guidance of Muslims," *Asatiza: Jurnal Pendidikan* 2(2) (2021): 89-97, <https://doi.org/10.46963/asatiza.v2i2.299>

¹⁴ Yusuf Rahman, "The Doctrine of *Mu'jiza*: According to the Schools of 'Kalam' in the Classical Period," *Islamic Quarterly* 40(4) (1996), 235; Al Khatieb, Ahmad Saad, "Material Exegesis of the Qur'an: Source and Extension: Al Hedayah wal 'Irfan Exegesis as a Model."

In the Jewish tradition, miracles are regarded as extraordinary events that demonstrate God's active presence and involvement in the world. The Hebrew Bible and other Jewish texts, such as the *Talmud* and *Midrash*, contain numerous accounts of miracles performed by biblical figures, including Moses, Elijah and Elisha.¹⁵ Miracle narratives in the Jewish tradition often emphasise themes such as divine providence, divine omnipotence and divine commandments.¹⁶

While Islamic texts describe miracles as *mu'jizat*, indicators of divine might and validation of prophetic messages, Jewish scriptures interpret these phenomena as demonstrations of divine providence and reaffirmations of the sacred covenant. Nevertheless, in both traditions, they attest to God's supernatural power and offer moral and spiritual guidance.

Methodology

The methodology for this study focuses on an analysis of primary sources. The aim is to investigate the similarities and differences between the two narratives, *Tafsir al-Tabari* and *The Legends of the Jews*, as well as the possible Islamic influence on Ginzberg's work. The study thus employs comparative textual analysis in order to further scholarly understanding of the theological precepts and ethical lessons to be found in these narratives. Through a synthesis of the findings, it is hoped that this examination will yield fruitful insights into theology and ethics that foster a greater understanding and appreciation of the two faiths.

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¹⁵ Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, vol. 1.

¹⁶ David L. Weddle, "Miracles: So, What?" In *Miracles: An Exercise in Comparative Philosophy of Religion*, eds. K. Zwier, D. Weddle, T. Knepper (New York: Springer, 2022), 315–325.

Background on Prophet Ibrahim and The Fiery Furnace Miracle

Prophet Ibrahim (PBUH) holds a paramount position in Islamic tradition, due to his unwavering faith and his many miracles that underscore his profound relationship with Allah.¹⁷ Some of the notable miracles associated with Ibrahim in the Qur'an and Islamic literature include the sacrifice of Isma'il (Ishmael), the miraculous birth of Isaac and the Miracle of the Birds.

In Jewish tradition, Prophet Ibrahim, known as Abraham, is celebrated for his unwavering faith and commitment to God.¹⁸ Several stories in the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic literature highlight miraculous events in Abraham's life, demonstrating God's favour and guidance, such as God's Call and Promise¹⁹, the Birth of Isaac²⁰ and the Binding of Isaac (Akedah)²¹.

The scholarly discourse surrounding the narrative of Prophet Abraham's trial by fire reveals divergent motivations behind Abraham's being cast into the fire by a tyrannical ruler, while also noting the absence of this narrative in the *Torah*. Al-Tabari's *Tafsir*, an authoritative Islamic exegetical work, posits Abraham's rejection of idolatry and subsequent destruction of idols as the primary catalyst for the event, underscoring themes of divine trial and monotheistic affirmation.²² Conversely, the *Midrash Rabbah*, a compendium of Jewish rabbinic literature, holds a more significant account, highlighting Abraham's intellectual confrontation with idol worship and his

¹⁷ Qur'an 37:102-107; 22:37.

¹⁸ Zev Farber, "Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity and Islam," *Interpretation* 68(3) (2014), 324–326.

¹⁹ Genesis 12:1–3.

²⁰ Genesis 18:9-15; 21:1-7.

²¹ Genesis 22:1-19

²² Al-Tabari, *Tafsir al-Tabari*, 1:307.

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defiance against Nimrod's authority.²³ *The Legends of the Jews*, which synthesises various Jewish traditions, presents a detailed narrative that not only recounts Abraham's challenge to idolatry but also includes the community's reaction and the divine intervention that ensures his survival.²⁴

Within the Islamic tradition, the fiery furnace miracle emerges as a pivotal moment that epitomises the resolute faith of Prophet Ibrahim in the Almighty and His Divine Safeguarding. This miracle follows upon his unequivocal repudiation of the idolatrous practices that surrounded him and his subsequent obliteration of idols, an act that was perceived as a direct affront to the prevailing socio-religious norms of his time.²⁵ Various *hadith* and Qur'anic exegeses, such as *Tafsir al-Tabari*,²⁶ expound upon this divine intervention, exploring its profound implications and highlighting it as a manifestation of Allah's boundless mercy and the inviolability of true faith.

The narrative of the fiery furnace miracle, while absent from the canonical texts of the *Hebrew Bible*, appears within *The Book of Jasher*, an extra-biblical compendium of Jewish lore and tradition that includes the tale of Prophet Abraham's confrontation with King Nimrod, a monarch steeped in idolatry and despotism.²⁷ The presence of this narrative within Jewish lore attests to its enduring significance in both Judaism and Islam. The portrayal of Abraham's unwavering faith and the divine providence that

²³ H. Freedman & M. Simon, eds. and trans., *Midrash Rabbah*, vol. 1, with a foreward by Rabbi Dr. I. Epstein (London: Soncino Press, [1930], 1961), 357-358.

²⁴ Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 1:209.

²⁵ Qur'an 21:68-69; 29:24; 37:97-98.

²⁶ Al-Tabari, *Tafsir al-Tabari*, vol. 16, commentary on surah al-Anbiya' (21:69), 315.

²⁷ See *The Book of Jasher; Joshua and Second Samuel*, translated from the Original Hebrew into English (Escondido, CA: The Book Tree, 2000).

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safeguards him is a recurring motif that transcends textual boundaries, reinforcing the thematic resonance of divine intervention and the vindication of true faith within Jewish exegetical tradition.

***Tafsir al-Tabari* on Prophet Ibrahim's Fiery Furnace Miracle**

Tafsir al-Tabari, officially known as *Jami' al-Bayan 'an Ta'wil Ayi al-Qur'an*, is a foundational Qur'anic exegesis authored by the esteemed Persian scholar Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (838-923 CE). This monumental work is revered for its expansive coverage and insightful depth, providing a holistic understanding of the Qur'anic verses through linguistic, historical and theological lenses.²⁸ Al-Tabari's exegetical approach in *Tafsir al-Tabari* is characterised by a comprehensive examination of various interpretations, showcasing a depth of scholarly engagement with the Qur'anic text. His methodology is fundamentally rooted in the tradition-based interpretation known as *tafsir bi al-ma'thur*, complemented by an emphasis on variant Qur'anic readings, linguistic analysis, juristic opinions and independent reasoning (*ijtihad*).²⁹ In the case of Prophet Ibrahim's fiery furnace miracle, *Tafsir al-Tabari* presents a detailed account and analysis of the relevant *Qur'anic* verses, providing valuable insights into the significance and implications of the miracle in Islamic tradition.

Context and Analysis in *Tafsir al-Tabari*

Al-Tabari's exegesis focuses on verses from surah al-Anbiya' 21:68-69 and surah al-Saffat 37:97-98, which relate to the fiery furnace miracle.³⁰ He investigates the context and meaning of these verses, explaining that after

²⁸ Al-Tabari, *Tafsir al-Tabari*, 18:484.

²⁹ Abdullah bin Abdul Mohsen Al-Turki, "Introduction to the Investigation in *Jami' al-Bayan 'an Ta'wil Ayi al-Qur'an*", 1:50-56.

³⁰ Al-Tabari, *Tafsir al-Tabari*, 16:307-308.

Ibrahim destroyed the idols, the people of his community decided to punish him by casting him into a huge fire. However, Allah intervened and commanded the fire to be cool and safe for him, turning it into a place of comfort and safety instead of harm. The Qur'anic account, as expounded by al-Tabari, not only reinforces the centrality of monotheism but also serves as an enduring reminder of the divine support that accompanies unwavering belief.

Similarly, in surah al-Saffat, the Qur'an states: "They said, "Build a furnace for him and throw him into the blazing fire". We [Allah] said, "O fire, be cool and safe for Abraham"" (37:97-98).³¹ Al-Tabari once again highlights the decision of Ibrahim's community to build a furnace and throw him into the fire. He emphasises that the people wanted to burn Ibrahim in retaliation for his rejection of idolatry and his call to monotheism. As in surah al-Anbiya', Allah's command to the fire to be cool and safe for Ibrahim demonstrates His protection over His chosen servants and His power to alter the natural order when necessary.³²

Theological Insights and Ethical Lessons

Tafsir al-Tabari provides a profound exploration of the fiery furnace miracle, revealing key theological themes that underscore Prophet Ibrahim's remarkable faith and dedication to monotheism amidst dire adversities. Several of the events narrated in this miracle illuminate his deep faith and commitment to the principle of monotheism in the face of mortal danger, such as confronting idolatry, destroying idols, enduring the flames, declining angelic aid and championing the cause of monotheism.³³

Through its narration of these events, *Tafsir al-Tabari* offers invaluable insights into the dynamics of faith and divine intervention, underscoring the importance of an

³¹ *Ibid.*, 16:309.

³² *Ibid.*, 16:307.

³³ *Ibid.*, 16:309-310.

unshakeable commitment to monotheism.³⁴ It accentuates the understanding that divine emissaries and devout followers are often subjected to arduous trials, serving as a crucible for their faith,³⁵ and it emboldens believers to anchor their trust in divine providence at all times, advocating for a steadfast and patient demeanour in the face of adversity. Moreover, the account underlines the profound impact of divine miracles in steering hearts toward the recognition and acceptance of Allah's supremacy. The miraculous salvation of Prophet Ibrahim from the inferno not only vindicated his faith but also illuminated the path of monotheism for others within his community, notably his kinsman Lot, who adopted the creed of monotheism in the wake of witnessing this celestial sign.³⁶

Analysis and Interpretation

Al-Tabari, in his *tafsir* presents various narrations (*isnad*) and scholarly opinions (*ijtihad*) of the fiery furnace miracle to emphasise the importance of considering multiple viewpoints when analysing religious texts. The accounts of the fire into which Prophet Ibrahim was cast portray a spectacle of immense scale and intensity, with the fire's magnitude described as so vast and fierce that it necessitated the use of catapults for Ibrahim's castigation.³⁷ This depiction is corroborated by Hadith literature, particularly a narration in *Sahih al-Bukhari*, which illustrates the collective effort by the people in amassing fuel for the fire, underscoring its monumental size and the communal trepidation it induced,³⁸ a testament to the profound trial Ibrahim endured.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 16:307.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 16:308.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 16:307.

The Islamic narrative records Jibril approaching Ibrahim, offering aid before he was catapulted into the fire. Ibrahim responded by asserting, "Allah (alone) is sufficient for us, and He is the Best Disposer of affairs", a sentiment echoed by Prophet Muhammad in times of trial, as narrated in *Sahih al-Bukhari*.³⁹ This narrative not only highlights the special status of Ibrahim within Islamic tradition but also serves as a testament to the enduring power of faith and reliance on the Divine in the face of adversity.

The fiery furnace miracle is a profound illustration of Allah's omnipotence and mercy. The Qur'anic verse "We said, "O fire, be coolness and safety upon Ibrahim"" (al-Anbiya': 69) has been subject to various scholarly interpretations regarding the fire's metamorphosis. Some exegetes propose that the fire transformed into a verdant garden or a serene haven for Prophet Ibrahim, signifying a complete inversion of its harmful nature. Other interpretations maintain that the fire's physical appearance remained unchanged yet was divinely rendered innocuous to Ibrahim, exemplifying the miraculous intervention of Allah.⁴⁰

Al-Tabari's exegesis of the fiery furnace miracle offers a unique lens through which to examine the similarities and differences between Islamic and Jewish interpretations of this event. Within Jewish tradition, this miracle is recounted in various Midrashic texts, a notable source being the Genesis Rabbah, where it is embellished with additional elements such as Abraham's destruction of his father's idols, his debates with the idolaters and the dramatic encounter with Nimrod leading to his being cast into the fire. This and other Midrashic accounts, while not

³⁹ Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, vol. 6, book 60, "Prophetic Commentary on the Qur'an (Tafsir of the Prophet)," hadith no. 4563, translated by Muhammad Muhsin Khan, accessed at: <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:4563>.

⁴⁰ Al-Tabari, *Tafsir al-Tabari*, 16:307-308.

canonical, provide a window into the rabbinic interpretation of Abraham's faith and his defiance against idolatry.⁴¹

Both the Jewish and Islamic traditions underscore the unwavering faith of Abraham/Ibrahim and the divine intervention that ensures his survival. They highlight the theme of God's protection over His devout servants. However, whereas the Midrash explores Abraham's early life and his active opposition to idolatry in greater depth, providing a backdrop to his eventual trial by fire, al-Tabari's account, rooted in the Qur'anic verses, focuses on God's miraculous deliverance of him from the blaze.

Ginzberg's Portrayal of the Miracle in *The Legends of The Jews*

In *The Legends of the Jews*, Louis Ginzberg intricately narrates the saga of the fiery furnace miracle, encapsulating the profound interplay between unwavering faith and divine deliverance. This portrayal, deeply rooted in the vast expanse of Jewish lore, brings to life the enduring tale of Abraham's confrontation with idolatry and his miraculous preservation amidst the flames. Ginzberg's narrative, rich in detail and imbued with theological insights, serves as a testament to the enduring legacy of Abraham's faith, illustrating the triumph of divine truth over mortal challenges. Through his compelling storytelling, Ginzberg not only recounts a pivotal event but also delves into the essence of faith, obedience and the immutable protection granted by the Divine to those who stand resolute in their convictions.

Background to Ginzberg's Compilation

Louis Ginzberg's seminal work, *The Legends of the Jews*, consisting of seven volumes, amalgamates a vast array of narratives drawn from the rich tapestry of Jewish tradition,

⁴¹ Jacob Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis: A New American Translation* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1985), 38:13.

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encompassing Talmudic, Midrashic and other Rabbinic writings. Compiled at the dawn of the 20th century, this collection serves as a panoramic vista into the Jewish narrative tradition, offering a deep exploration of the lives and sagas of biblical personages. Ginzberg eloquently states, "My book ... is intended to give the reader an insight into the treasure of folklore, legend, and anecdote stored up in the bosom of the Jewish people".⁶⁷

The Fiery Furnace Miracle: A Testament to Faith and Divine Intervention

Within the annals of Ginzberg's work, the fiery furnace miracle emerges not merely as an isolated marvel but as a pivotal chapter in the saga of Abraham's spiritual odyssey toward monotheism. This narrative segment, intricately woven into the broader tapestry of his life, epitomizes the quintessence of faith and the indomitable spirit of steadfast belief in the face of tyranny.

Ginzberg narrates, "The flames shot up to the skies, and the people were sore afraid of the fire. ... Yet, "O fire, be coolness and peace unto Abraham", was the Divine command".⁶⁸ This vivid portrayal not only highlights the miraculous salvation of Abraham but also underscores the thematic core of divine guardianship and the triumph of faith over the despotic decree. The narrative intricately details the machinations of King Nimrod, the construction of the gargantuan furnace, and the communal efforts to fuel the flames, setting the stage for what seems an inevitable doom for Abraham. However, the tale takes a divine turn, with the inferno transforming into a sanctum of serenity, a miraculous testament to Abraham's unwavering faith and the omnipotence of God.

Ginzberg extends the narrative beyond the miracle itself, delving into the aftermath of Abraham's deliverance.

⁶⁷ Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, Vol. 1, Preface.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:197.

He explores the ripple effects of this divine intervention, from the conversion of onlookers to the widespread acknowledgment of the one true God. As Ginzberg recounts, "All the princes and all the people believed in God at this hour, in the Eternal, the God of Abraham".⁶⁹ This statement highlights the transformative impact of Abraham's ordeal on the collective consciousness of his contemporaries.

Through *The Legends of the Jews*, Ginzberg not only preserves the narrative legacy of Jewish tradition but also enriches it, imbuing these ancient tales with layers of moral and theological significance. His work stands as a beacon of Jewish narrative art, ensuring that the timeless lessons woven into these stories continue to enlighten and inspire.

Key Themes

At the heart of Ginzberg's retelling of the Fiery Furnace Miracle lies the unwavering faith of Abraham in God's omnipotence and benevolence, a faith so strong that it sustains him even in the face of imminent death. Ginzberg portrays Abraham declaring, "God in whom I trust, the God of heaven and earth, will rescue me", underscoring the quintessential belief in divine intervention and protection. He also highlights the theme of trial and tribulation, suggesting that the trials faced by the faithful are not merely arbitrary challenges, but purposeful tests designed to refine and fortify one's character and faith. Abraham's ordeal in the fiery furnace emerges not as an anecdote of survival but as a testament to the transformative power of unwavering faith under duress.

Central to Ginzberg's narrative is Abraham's unshakeable commitment to monotheism, illustrated by his readiness to confront the idolatrous practices of his time. This commitment underscores the narrative's overarching theological message: the importance of upholding the

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:198.

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worship of the one true God. Ultimately, *The Legends of the Jews* transcends its cultural and religious origins, presenting the fiery furnace miracle as a universal allegory of the resilience of faith, the certainty of divine succour and the imperative of moral conviction. Through Ginzberg's narrative, readers are invited to reflect on the enduring relevance of these themes, encouraging a deeper appreciation for the trials and triumphs of faith across all walks of life.⁷⁰

The Possible Influence of Islamic Exegesis on Ginzberg's Compilation

An examination of the historical and cultural milieu surrounding *Tafsir al-Tabari* and *The Legends of the Jews* suggests a possible influence of Islamic exegesis on Ginzberg's retelling of the event. *Tafsir al-Tabari* presents an exhaustive Qur'anic interpretation, weaving together narratives, including those of prophets revered in Abrahamic faiths. The precedence of this work, completed in the 10th century (923 CE), alongside its scholarly acclaim, suggests that Ginzberg, whose compilation was completed in 1909, may have encountered the Islamic text and incorporated certain aspects of it.

Shared Motifs in the Two Accounts

1. Angelic Interventions: Ginzberg's account of the angel Gabriel's role in rescuing Abraham from the flames,⁷¹ while absent in the Torah, finds parallels in both Islamic exegesis and Midrashic literature.⁷² This motif highlights the intertextual connections between these traditions.
2. Prophet Abraham's Life Narratives: The detailed portrayal of Abraham's life in Ginzberg's work, particularly his defiance against idolatry, is present in

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:196–198.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 1:222.

⁷² Al-Tabari, *Tafsir al-Tabari*, 16:307; P'sachim, fol. 118, col. 1.

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both *Tafsir al-Tabari*⁷³ and Midrashic literature,⁷⁴ pointing to a synthesis of narratives across cultures.⁷⁵

3. Trials of Faith: The trial motif, explored in Ginzberg's compilation, while not detailed in the Torah, is echoed in *Tafsir al-Tabari*⁷⁶ and Talmudic discussions, emphasising the universal reverence for Abraham's/Ibrahim's perseverance.⁷⁷

Conclusion

This investigation into the narrative of Prophet Ibrahim's fiery furnace miracle, as it appears within both Islamic and Jewish textual traditions, underscores the profound interconnectedness of these religious narratives. The potential influence of al-Tabari's exegesis on Ginzberg's work emphasises the shared elements of their storytelling heritage, pointing to possible historical and cultural exchanges. In light of these findings, the following scholarly and interfaith recommendations are proposed:

1. Comparative analyses of narratives and theological motifs prevalent across diverse religious traditions enrich the academic discourse on religious studies. Such scholarly endeavours enhance our understanding of the historical and cultural elements that inform various faiths.
2. Interfaith dialogue can serve as a pivotal platform for cultivating mutual respect, understanding and appreciation among various faith communities. Initiatives at promoting interfaith dialogue should thus be encouraged.
3. It is recommended that faith communities unite in collaborative endeavours to address universal

⁷³ Al-Tabari, *Tafsir al-Tabari*, 16:308.

⁷⁴ Freedman & Simon, eds. and trans., *Midrash Rabbah*, 357–358.

⁷⁵ Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 1:188–191.

⁷⁶ Al-Tabari, *Tafsir al-Tabari*, 7:81.

⁷⁷ Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 5:221.

challenges, including poverty, injustice and environmental concerns. Joint efforts not only underscore a shared commitment to core humanitarian values but also contribute significantly to a more equitable and compassionate global community.

The foregoing analysis of the narrative concerning Prophet Ibrahim's ordeal in the fiery furnace, as presented in both Islamic and Jewish textual traditions, has led to the following observations:

1. The study has illuminated shared theological motifs within the *Tafsir al-Tabari* and Ginzberg's *The Legends of the Jews*, underscoring a common narrative fabric that binds these religious traditions. This revelation fosters a foundation for mutual respect and a deeper appreciation of each tradition's unique interpretative nuances.
2. The Qur'anic account, as explicated in *Tafsir al-Tabari*, exhibits notable clarity and consistency, contrasting with the more elaborate narrative style found in Ginzberg's compilation. This divergence not only highlights varied interpretative preferences but also enriches the discourse on the fiery furnace miracle by offering diverse perspectives.
3. The presence of certain narratives within Ginzberg's *The Legends of the Jews*, absent from canonical Jewish texts but paralleled in Islamic sources, suggests a potential cross-pollination of narratives. This hypothesis, supported by the earlier composition of al-Tabari's work, points to a dynamic interplay of religious traditions that transcends temporal and cultural boundaries.
4. The study accentuates the distinct approach of the Qur'anic narrative in maintaining a focused and succinct portrayal of the events, thereby emphasizing key moral and spiritual lessons. By contrast, the more detailed accounts in Ginzberg's work offer a broader

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narrative scope that may incorporate interpretative elements. The Qur'an approach ensures the preservation of its divine essence and facilitates a direct engagement with the core theological messages.

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