

Lesson: Moses Kills Og (Uj) the Giant

This lesson is accompanied by a handout,
Visual Analysis: Four Steps toward Critically Thinking about Art.

Essential Question: What are the meaning and significance of prophecy in Islam? In what ways are Jewish and Christian stories incorporated into the Muslim narrative of Islamic history?

Learning Experience: Students will learn about the central importance of prophecy in Islam through a painting depicting Moses killing the giant Og (“Uj” in Arabic) in the presence of Muhammad, the infant Jesus, and others.

Anticipatory Set: This painting groups people together who in fact never lived at the same point in time. It defies historical truth in favor of religious truth as seen by the faithful. How does art, particularly religious art, allow us to experience truth on different levels?

Context: The story of Moses and Og originates in the Hebrew Bible. In Islam, paintings such as this were illustrations of a literary genre called “The Lives of the Prophets” (*qisas al-anbiya*), accounts based on “oral interpretation of the stories of Biblical characters. . . collections of stories, parables, maxims, and interpretations.” They were meant both to expand on the often cursory mention of the prophets in the Qur’an and to serve as a form of popular entertainment (Thackston 1978: xiii, xiv).

Moses is an important figure in the Qur’an, mentioned more often than any other individual. Muslims compare Moses’s mission and the events of his life to Muhammad’s. The exodus from Egypt, for example, is compared to the Hijra (622 CE)—the journey from Mecca to Medina undertaken by Muhammad and his followers, one of the most important events in Islam’s history. Just as the Israelites sought freedom from Egyptian slavery, the early Muslim community sought freedom to worship through the Hijra.

Muhammad met Moses when he took his famous [Night Journey](#). Guided by the Angel Gabriel, he ascended to heaven from the [Dome of the Rock](#) in Jerusalem. He saw the seven heavens, paradise and hell, and spoke with God. In the sixth heaven Muhammad saw

an old man with long, abundant hair who was wearing a thick garment of white wool. He was supporting himself with a staff. His hair almost covered his body and he had a white beard that rested on his chest. I said, “Who is this, my brother Gabriel?” He said, “This is your brother Moses ibn Imran. God favored him with His words and deeds and He made him His spokesman. Draw near to him and greet him.” So I approached him and greeted him. He looked at me and began saying, “The tribe of Israel claims that I am the most noble of creation before God. But this one (in front of me) is more noble than I am before his Lord” (Calder 2003: 26).

When God commanded Muhammad to have his followers pray fifty times a day, Moses [advised](#) Muhammad to go back and implore God to reduce the number: “Return and ask Him to lighten this for your community, the final community of time. Their bodies are frail and their lives are short” (Calder 2006: 25). God finally reduced the prayers from fifty to five. Praying five times a day, of course, is a pillar of the Muslim faith.

The painting studied in this lesson shows Moses killing Og, the king of Bashan. This story appears in the Hebrew Bible (Numbers, Deuteronomy, Psalms 135 and 136) and is elaborated in the Talmud (rabbinical teachings on law, ethics, customs, etc.). Different versions exist in both Judaism and Islam. The story is part of the narrative concerning the Israelites’ arrival in the Promised Land after wandering in the desert for forty years.

Og lived for three thousand years. He is first mentioned in the Hebrew Bible in relation to Noah and the Flood. Bashan (H-5 on this [map](#)) was located in the northernmost part of the region east of the Jordan River. After Og’s defeat, his kingdom was given to one of the tribes of Israel. The destruction of Bashan was one of the victories enabling the Israelites, [but not Moses](#), to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land.

Og and his subjects were Amorites, “masters of witchcraft” and a people known

as the most intractable of all nations. To the apocryphal writers of the first and second pre-Christian century [the Apocrypha are texts excluded from the Jewish and Protestant versions of the Hebrew Bible] they are the main representatives of heathen superstition, loathed as idolaters (www: Amorites).

Thus the slaying of Og is a warning to unbelievers who oppose the word of God as revealed to the prophets. More generally, the Moses/Og theme is an admonition to be firm in one’s religious beliefs and practices. An entry about Moses killing Og in a sixteenth-century Persian book of divination advises that

The fact that Moses and Og have appeared in your *fal* [divination] confirms the wretched plight of your enemies. Follow God and the religious path, and you will never be afflicted by sorrow (www: Afsar 2012).

A sixteenth-century [Ottoman Turkish painting](#) depicts a different story about Moses and Og. Moses tries to help Og curb a huge appetite for bread which even seventy bakers cannot satisfy. It conveys a lesson about the workings of faith:

Moses proposes a way for him to be satisfied by only seven mouthfuls. He suggests that before eating, Og should wash his hands and recite the *bismillah* (“In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate”) and then take the bowl. The giant did it and was unable to consume even seven mouthfuls. Moses then says, “Know that satisfaction comes from God. Bread is just a pretext” (Adapted from www: Rumi).

The painting shows Moses killing Og in the presence of Muhammad, the infant Jesus, and others. Obviously, it does not depict an event that happened in real time. It is an emblem—the representation of an idea. The intended viewers of this work were familiar with the story and characters, as well as the symbols involved.

Muhammad is shown wearing a veil over his face, something that appears in Iranian art during the sixteenth century. (The earliest known representations of [Muhammad](#) are from an early fourteenth-century manuscript in which the Prophet is shown without a veil.) A rich tradition of [figurative art](#) existed in Islam but

is almost invariably restricted to a private context. Figurative art is excluded from the decoration of religious monuments. This absence may be attributed to an Islamic antipathy toward anything that might be mistaken for idols or idolatry, which are explicitly forbidden by the Qur'an (www: Islamic Art).

Rationale: Although students frequently know about the Five Pillars, basic facts about the life of Muhammad, and that Sunnism and Shi'ism are the major sectarian divisions in Islam, they seldom go into greater depth about how Muslims experience their faith and what symbols and images are important to them. Through this painting students will get a sense of the important place that prophets and prophecy occupy in Islam as well as Muslim reverence for the Prophet Moses ("Musa" in Arabic).

Time: Three or four forty-minute sessions, depending on how much of the lesson is assigned as homework.

Instructional Resources: Handouts (1) *Fact Sheet: Judaism, Christianity, Islam* (there is also a teacher key); (2) "Prophets" worksheet; (3) "Og" worksheet ; (4) *Visual Analysis: Four Steps Toward Critically Thinking About Art* handout. Painting of Moses killing Og the giant.

The observations below are meant to be a partial teacher's guide.

Scene from Legends of the Prophets
"The Giant Uj and the Prophets from the Three Major Monotheistic Religions—Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad"
Tabriz, Iran or Baghdad, Iraq | Jalayirid (1336-1432)
Early 15th century
(KHAL.2006.0019)



- The Jalayirids (1336-1432) were a Mongol dynasty that controlled Iraq and western Iran.
- Although scholars question whether the Jalayirids were [Shi'ites](#), there are Shi'ite [symbols](#) in this painting. The [bifurcated sword](#) held by the figure at the lower left is a famous sword called Dhu'l Faqar that belonged to Muhammad and was reportedly given to Ali (c. 600-661), the fourth Sunni caliph. Ali was a son-in-law of Muhammad and the person Shi'ites recognize as the caliph to succeed Muhammad. The man holding the sword is a servant of Ali's seen in other paintings. (Iranian paintings of Muhammad's Night Journey sometimes also include a [lion](#). Ali was called "the Lion of God.")
- The two boys at Muhammad's side are his grandsons. One of them is Ali's son Husayn (664-680), who became a Shi'ite martyr. The holiday commemorating his death at the [Battle of Karbala](#) is also believed to be the day when God parted the Red Sea for Moses and the Israelites.
- The four men seated in front of Muhammad are the first four Sunni caliphs who ruled after his death. Ali, the fourth caliph, is on the left, apart from the others. Shi'ites believe Ali should have been the first caliph—his relationship to Muhammad is compared to the relationship between Moses and his brother Aaron.
- The flame-like haloes in the painting are believed to derive from [Buddhist images](#).

Procedure: The lesson has two parts: The first is on basic facts about Islam, the second discusses the Jalayirid painting. Depending on time constraints, some parts of the lesson can be done as homework.

(1)

- Hand out the "*Fact Sheet: Judaism, Christianity, Islam.*" Have students work in groups and fill in information about Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and then do the vocabulary. Have one reporter from each group circulate to the other groups to compare responses and check with her original group to see that all have accurate information.
- In a full class discussion, have students discuss all they know about Islam with the teacher writing on the board. What questions do they still have about Islam?
- In small groups have each group compose a story about what they know. Each group then shares with the entire class their interpretation of the story of Islam.
- Give each student the prophets worksheet. Have them read the definitions, the passages from the Qur'an, and the passages about Muhammad either out loud or silently. Have each student answer the questions and have a full class discussion of their responses.

(2)

"The Giant Uj and the Prophets from the Three Major

Monotheistic Religions—Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad”

- Explain the background of this story in the Hebrew Bible.
- Discuss the symbolism of the painting.
- Give students the Og worksheet . Have each student answer the questions.
- Give each student a visual analysis worksheet. Of the seven design elements, do some stand out as more important than others? Can you make a general statement with respect to the design issues that the creators of these works regarded as important?
- Study the basic artistic principles—balance, unity, emphasis, contrast, pattern, movement, and rhythm in terms of the two paintings. Do some of these principles stand out as more important than others? Can you make a general statement with respect to the artistic principles that the creators of these works thought important?

Whole Group Reflection: Have students gather all their information and compile a list: what they have learned, what they would like to research further, and how their ideas about Islam have changed or been confirmed. In a full class discussion, have students explain how the art enhanced their learning.

Instructional Modification: Students can write a short paragraph for each art piece explaining what they have learned from each. They can also compare the painting with medieval and early modern European images of Jewish and Christian prophets:

<p>Isaiah Michelangelo (1475-1564) Italian c. 1508-1512</p>	<p>Moses France 12th century</p>	<p>Jeremiah Rembrandt (1606-1669) Dutch 1630</p>
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Application: Students can draw their own original art piece of this story. They can also write a short description and explanation of the piece as if they were visiting a gallery or museum.

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Acknowledgements

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