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NEW APPROACHES TO "BIBLICAL" MATERIALS IN THE QUR'ĀN

When scholars investigate the apparent transmission of material from one monotheistic scripture to another, they tend to assume that earlier materials are normative and later ones derivative. This tendency, if unmitigated, makes it difficult to appreciate either earlier or later materials in and of themselves; and it affects scholars' attitudes to the whole of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition and each of its various parts. Often the recipient of the "transmitted" materials is assigned a relationship to the transmitter not unlike the one established in a certain Mulla Naṣr al-Dīn story: Naṣr al-Dīn had waited in vain all day in a qadi's court for a gold coin of reparation to be brought back by a man whom the qadi had fined for slapping him across the face in a public market. Finally, exasperated, he went up to the qadi and slapped him hard across the face, saying, "Here's the slap. When he gets back, you get the gold coin."

A promising complement to influence and transmission studies is to be found in the analysis of narrative, or narratology. A narratological approach can elucidate "Biblical" material in the Qur'ān so as to clarify not only the relationship of Bible to Qur'ān, but the art of Qur'anic narrative as well.¹ The Sūrat Yūsuf, the twelfth Qur'anic chapter, will serve as a specific example which has wider implications for the fields of history of religion and literary history as well.

When non-Muslims look at this sura, or any other Qur'anic chapter containing a story that appears in another scripture, they naturally tend to place it in a dependency relationship, to see it as a "version," as something passed on in altered, if not debased, form. Consider, for example, the conclusion reached by one Biblical scholar of Genesis 39, after his first reading of the Qur'anic Joseph narrative. A reader of the Qur'ān would have to be familiar with the Biblical version to be able to understand the Qur'anic version fully:

Both the OT and Qur'an make special claims for the narratives contained within their pages. Each insists that the reader accept the stories given there as the "original version" in the deepest sense. Stories which include this claim to authority must be interpreted differently from texts which make no such claim. The situation presented by the Qur'anic and OT Joseph stories is especially complex, because both stories assume that the reader will accept their authority as given and final. Nevertheless, the situation is not "balanced," for only the Qur'an recognizes the existence of other "versions" of its stories, and self-consciously takes a polemical stance toward those versions. That is, the Qur'an is admittedly "dependent" on the OT, even if the dependence is only for the purpose of replacing the chronologically older stories with what it claims are the true stories.

¹ It is only Genesis 37-46 that parallels the Qur'anic Joseph story. The Bible contains much more about Joseph than does the Qur'an, which concerns itself only with Joseph in Egypt.

Therefore, the Qur'an itself leads the interpreter to view the relation between the OT and itself as a case of one-sided dependence. This means that the interpreter of the biblical Joseph story, for example, does not need to know the Qur'anic story in order to fully understand the biblical narrative, while the interpreter of Sura 12 must refer to the biblical Joseph to fully understand the Qur'anic Joseph.²

This particular author, however, does not limit himself to using the Bible to understand the Qur'ān. Rather, he also appreciates the value of comparison in identifying the uniqueness of the Biblical version:

Understanding of the biblical story can of course [also] be facilitated by comparing the OT narrative with other stories which are based on it, or which have been viewed as "similar" to it in some respect. Such comparison can make the interpreter more aware of the unique traits of the biblical story, by recognizing its differences from other "versions."³

By extension, he is implying that comparison points to the uniqueness of each telling, a uniqueness that can be accounted for only through an internal analysis of each. Furthermore, he is implicitly calling for an approach to groups of seemingly related stories that focuses not just on the relationship of version to original/ancestor, but also on the strategies and constraints of each telling in its own larger context(s).

The components of such an approach might be assembled from the work of folklorists, narratologists, and speech-act theorists. Especially germane is a series of points made by Barbara Herrnstein Smith, a particularly articulate and effective spokesperson for new approaches to narrative.⁴ Smith conceptualizes the relationship of simulations to gem but more as the relationship of a string to the necklace of gems it holds together.⁵ In Smith's view, no telling of a story is more basic than any other(s), and originals really do not exist. Drawing on research about various tellings of "the Cinderella story," she argues that

1. For any particular narrative, there is no single *basically* basic story subsisting beneath it but, rather, an unlimited number of other narratives that can be *constructed in response* to it or *perceived as related to it*.

2. Among the narratives that can be constructed in response to a given narrative are not only those that we commonly refer to as "versions" of it (for example, translations, adaptations, abridgements, and paraphrases) but also those retellings that we call "plot summaries," "interpretations,"

² Stuart Lasine, "The Functions of Genesis 39 in the Joseph Narrative," unpublished paper (1982), pp. 11-12.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories," *Critical Inquiry*, VII (1980), 213-36.

⁵ I am indebted to Jean Blacker-Knight for this metaphor.

and, sometimes, “basic stories.” None of these retellings, however, is more absolutely basic than any of the others.

3. For any given narrative there are always *multiple* basic stories that can be constructed in response to it because basic-ness is always arrived at by the exercise of some set of operations, in accord with some set of principles, that reflect some set of interests, all of which are, by nature, variable and thus multiple. . . .

4. The form and features of any “version” of a narrative will be a function of, among other things, the particular motives that elicited it and the particular interests and functions it was designed to serve. . . .

5. Among any array of narratives—tales or tellings—in the universe, there is an unlimited number of potentially perceptible *relations*. These relations may be of many different kinds and orders, including formal and thematic, synchronic and diachronic, and causal and non-causal. Whenever these potentially perceptible relations become actually perceived, it is by virtue of some set of interests on the part of the perceiver. . . . Since new sets of interests can emerge at any time and do emerge continuously, there can be no ultimately basic set of relations among narratives, and thus also no “natural” genres of “essential” types, and thus also no limit to the number or nature of narratives that may sometime be seen as versions or variants of each other.⁶

The implications of these positions for reading and making sense of the Qur’anic story of Joseph are far-reaching. If applied, they could correct the imbalance that usually informs Qur’ān-Bible comparisons. For Smith is saying that no story is permanently “part” of a single diachronic series or synchronic set of stories with which it has a fixed objective affinity. There is never a single context in which a story can be heard or read or told. Stories always have plural contexts, even for a single hearer or reader. The perception of an affinity with other stories on the part of an individual or community arises out of their interests, as does their choice of criteria by which to determine affinity. Therefore, any given story can be at once part of many affinal groups, perceived as sets by different individuals or even by various individuals within the same community. Furthermore, when a story is perceived as “belonging” to a group of stories, it can affect the understanding of other stories in the group.

The Appendix to this article is a fine example of the importance of context and of the fallacy of the idea of *ur*-stories. In that appendix both the Biblical and Qur’anic Joseph stories are “told,” but this time in terms of nineteen action-advancing steps or stages determined by the prose and shape of the Qur’anic telling.⁷ Both tellings, constructed for the special needs of this essay (especially to

⁶ Smith, “Narrative Versions,” pp. 221–22. Compare Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), p. 50.

⁷ Parenthetical references are made to these numbers from page 9 below on.

highlight similarities and differences), are coherent; neither is more basic than the other; and the Biblical one proves to be tellable at approximately the same pace as the Qur'anic, even though it is three times as long.

So, even if we could establish probable lines of transmission from Torah to Qur'ān, we would still not exhaust the Qur'anic telling, either in its own contemporary contexts or in any historically accumulated ones. We must assume that there were many ways in which the Joseph story or something like it could be told in Muḥammad's time (just as the Biblical telling is not the oldest extant Near Eastern one), and many disparate pieces which could be fitted together or excluded. No matter where else we might find those pieces, their use in a given telling is our primary focus. Smith would argue that for any given listener or reader from the seventh century on, the Qur'anic Joseph story's possible affinities cannot be limited to other Joseph stories and especially not to specific, say Biblical or exegetical tellings, of a perceptible Joseph story.

To view the Qur'anic Joseph story as a version of the Biblical one is itself a cultural decision and an essentially literary-historical one at that. Other motifs—for example, rags-to-riches, sibling rivalry, Divinely-guided friend of God—multiply the affinities almost infinitely, and the inclusion of this story in such a group, or the perception of it *as belonging* to those groups, could then also begin to affect future tellings of stories in that group. Thus did some later Qur'ān commentators, presumably those concerned to explain how certain revelations expressed God's relationship with Muḥammad, identify the Joseph story as something God told Muḥammad to cheer and entertain him during a bad period in his career, full as the story is of sex and intrigue as well as triumph for the friends of God. For other writers, Joseph became *the* symbol of beauty, or Joseph and Zulaykhā quintessential lovers and foci for eroticism, or Zulaykhā a lesson in the human tendency to yield to baser temptations.⁸

Although Smith does help us to understand the nature of affinity once established, she seems to evade the question of what constitutes that affinity if the stories perceived as related are not to be viewed as versions of an original or basic telling. Implicitly, however, she seems to suggest that when one perceives stories as part of the same group, one is thinking in terms of similarities among certain minimal, often formal characteristics, for example, titles, names, and characters; overall plot; and order of occurrences or episodes. In putting the Qur'anic and Biblical Joseph stories in the same set, we are relying on our

⁸ Concerning the story as prophetic morale booster, oral communication from Mahmoud Ayoub, April 18, 1983; concerning Joseph's beauty, see Cornell Hugh Fleischer, "Gelibolulu Mustafa Ali Efendi, 1541-1600: A Study in Ottoman Historical Consciousness" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1982), p. 27; concerning Joseph and Zulaykhā as lovers, see Robert Dankoff, "The Lyric in the Romance: The Use of Ghazals in Persian and Turkish Masnavi," *JNES*, XLIII (1984), 18; and W.M. Thackston, Jr., tr., *The Tale of the Prophets of al-Kisā'ī* [Library of Classical Arabic Literature, Vol. II] (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), pp. 167-80; concerning Zulaykhā as symbol of human failings, see Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Y. Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), p. 16. Joseph's "almost" yielding to the wife took on a different meaning as the concept of the prophets' being *ma'ṣūm* (protected from sin) crystallized.

perception of such affinities; yet I will argue, after comparing the two, that despite the extensive presence of numerous such formal affinities, the two do not tell the same story in thematic, theological, or moral terms. In fact, they are probably just as much like other stories as they are like each other.⁹

Since Smith emphasizes the need to set the context in which a given telling is told, let me begin with some general observations about the larger texts within which the individual stories appear. The two scriptures in question differ in a number of obvious and fundamental ways. Whatever the oral qualities and dimensions of the Hebrew Bible, it has come down to us as a written composition. The Qur’ān, despite its having a written form, presents itself as essentially an oral composition. Many of the readily apparent divergences between the two books, overall or in renderings of a given story, are traceable primarily to the natural and predictable consequences of oral as opposed to written composition.

The Torah is, moreover, a continuous, extended historical account. The Qur’ān contains very little narrated history (in fact, very little narration at all) and, in the standard order of the suras, is a disjunctive and discontinuous book of lessons, warnings, instructions, and exhortations. The Torah is written in expository prose; the Qur’ān, in compact, often elliptical, quasi-poetic style. The Qur’anic story, like much of the narrative in the book to which it belongs, is less detailed and faster paced, one-third the length of the Biblical story. The Biblical story, approximately three times as long as the Qur’anic, is, like its container, very detailed and frequently interrupted by narrative digressions and genealogical materials. Qur’anic language presents itself as God’s speech, verbatim; the Torah is not constructed throughout as God’s quoted speech but rather as reliable third-person narration of divine action.

When one looks at the place of each story within its entire work, the differences are just as striking. In the Qur’ān, Joseph is the subject of one of many teaching stories, albeit one of the longest, most detailed and most colorful. Without it, however, the Qur’ān would still make sense. And without the Qur’ān, the “Sura of Joseph” could still be read on its own, decontextualized as it is. For the Bible, however, the story of Joseph is essential; it accounts for twenty-eight percent of the Book of Genesis and constitutes a key moment in the history of the Hebrew people. Within the overall purposes of the Qur’ān, the Joseph story serves, like most other narrative therein, as a didactic vehicle, in this case to show how God sends signs and constantly guides and rewards the God-fearing. In the Bible, the telling of the Joseph story is an indispensable step in the unfolding of God’s divine plan and manipulation of history to ensure the future of the Hebrews. Consequently, the figure of God seems somewhat more distant in the Biblical story, less concentrated on a relationship with Joseph and more involved with the lives of all the many characters, whereas in the Qur’ān God interferes with and guides His messenger constantly, the other characters remaining more shadowy and less clearly defined.

⁹ Alter, *The Art*, pp. 3–10, referring to Genesis 38.

In addition to its not being part of a larger historical narrative, the Qur'anic story is strongly decontextualized in another way. Other than Joseph, no Qur'anic character is named directly ('Azīz, the "name" of Joseph's master, could be construed as a title). This anonymity of other characters has the effect of making the Qur'anic story even more the story of Joseph, Messenger of God, and less the story of "his people." It also emphasizes the universal meaning of the story and minimizes the need to compare it with any other telling. In fact, there is little indication that the contemporary listener would have to have heard a similar story previously in order to make at least some sense of the Qur'anic telling.

The two tellings can also be compared in other ways. Their shapes are different: The Biblical story flows from one stage in Joseph's life to another; the Qur'anic story is self-contained—enclosed by the prediction of the initial dream's meaning and its fulfillment. In both cases the narrative is interrupted, but differently. The Qur'anic story is essentially a single tale, interrupted by shorter or longer homiletic editorializing, as it were, by God or a character. The Biblical story is a composite, and the narrator(s) is (are) not nearly so strongly present. The main story about Joseph in Egypt is interrupted by another significant related one (Judah's marriage to Shua and Tamar and the Sin of Onan) and by repetitions of the whole story to a given point thrice, which Robert Alter sees as part of the Bible's way of searching for multi-faceted truth.¹⁰

Jacob's roles differ, too. In the Qur'ān, Jacob is an aid and mentor for Joseph, whose humanness and manipulability are stressed as marks of his dependence on God. Through his existence and ability to read God's signs, others learn to understand God's signs as well. The Biblical Jacob is not a messenger of God or an insightful mentor for Joseph; rather, he seems more a victim of circumstances, and more psychologically and emotionally expressive of that condition.

One final type of comparison is suggested by Robert Alter's approach to Biblical narrative. Although four of his major concerns—type-scenes, artful repetition, juxtaposition of versions (composite artistry), and reticence in characterization¹¹—seem not to apply to the Qur'ān, his fifth major focus—preference for direct speech, particularly dialogue—does. According to Alter, although Biblical authors sometimes restate in third-person voice what has been said in dialogue, they avoid indirect speech. By strongly preferring direct speech, they bring the speech-act into the foreground; make the reader more conscious of the speaker and his/her use of language; and produce complicating ambiguity for the interpreter of speech because the narrators, by not stating it in third-person, do not give it their stamp of authority.¹² He goes on to say that "when an actual process of contemplating specific possibilities, sorting out feelings,

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 138, 140, and 153–54.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 67.

weighing alternatives, making resolutions, is a moment in the narrative event, it is reported as direct discourse.”¹³

It is in his exploration of the reasons for the Biblical preference for direct speech that we begin to have insights into the Qur’ān as well, one of whose most fundamental theological points is shared with the Bible: the intimate relationships among speech (divine and human), creation, and revelation. Alter begins his discussion of the Biblical preference for direct speech by surmising that the Biblical authors may have reported thought as speech because they “did not distinguish sharply between the two in their assumptions about how the mind relates to reality. Perhaps with their strong sense of the primacy of language in the created order of things, they tended to feel that thought was not fully itself until it was articulated into speech.”¹⁴

As Alter then penetrates more deeply into the theological issues that promote the Biblical narrators’ preference for direct speech, he reaches conclusions that can also be applied to the Qur’anic treatment of Joseph:

what is important to him [the Biblical writer] is human will confronted with alternatives which it may choose on its own or submit to divine determination. Articulated language provides the indispensable model for defining this rhythm of political or historical alternatives, question and response, creaturely uncertainty over against the Creator’s intermittently revealed design, because in the Biblical view words underlie reality. With words God called the world into being; the capacity for using language from the start set man apart from the other creatures; in words each person reveals his distinctive nature, his willingness to enter into binding compacts with men and God, his ability to control others, to deceive them, to feel for them, and to respond to them. Spoken language is the substratum of everything human and divine that transpires in the Bible.¹⁵

And again,

Every human agent must be allowed the freedom to struggle with his destiny through his own words and acts. Formally, this means that the writer must permit each character to manifest or reveal himself or herself chiefly through dialogue but of course also significantly through action, without the imposition of an obtrusive apparatus of authorial interpretation and judgment. The Hebrew narrator does not openly meddle with the personages he presents, just as God creates in each human personality a fierce tangle of intentions, emotions, and calculations caught in a translucent net of language, which is left for the individual himself to sort out in the evanescence of a single lifetime.¹⁶

¹³ Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 69–70.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 87.

However, despite what appears to be a similar understanding of language itself, the Qurʾān's narrative situation is still different from that of the Bible. Biblical narrators depend on God for their "omniscience" or reliability, and display it, according to Alter, in rather indirect ways in their reliable third-person narrative. The Qurʾanic narrator *is* the omniscient God, speaking orally and committed to a high degree of explicitness—to giving clear guidance—but without being *so* explicit that the message does not grab the attention of the listener and draw him or her in. Even when direct speech appears in the Qurʾān, it is being quoted by God. As we will see, the theological effects achieved by Biblical authors by their use of direct speech are achieved by the Qurʾān in the way in which the story is told and oriented. Also, since the Qurʾān is organized as a cumulative oral revelation, the degree to which it is internally coherent and consistent increases to the extent that individual parts reinforce each other and its overall moral and spiritual vision.

The art of Qurʾanic narrative, which often deals with particular well-known historical stories, is to get those small stories to tell themselves and bear a larger cosmic message at the same time.¹⁷ Qurʾanic characters are portrayed with an emblematic quality that one finds also in the aniconism of Islamic art. Figures whom the Bible characterizes thoroughly are minimally portrayed in the Qurʾān. Because they thereby discourage the listener from becoming psychologically entrapped, they are freer to be instruments of a broader message for a broader audience.

All these differences between the two tellings, as well as the similarities, are largely consistent with their different purposes, natures, and settings, and cannot be explained adequately by an exclusively literary-historical approach. Most important, the Joseph the Qurʾān portrays has to be recognizable as a messenger of God in terms of the composite definition of messengership that emerges from all the Qurʾān's many references to such figures, whereas the Bible does not present Joseph as a messenger at all. The Qurʾanic story of Joseph could in fact be said to focus on Joseph as a representative of instrumental messengership and as a measure of its nature and effect. It is quite possible to construct a general Qurʾanic image of the prophetic role and to recognize Joseph according to it. The Qurʾān's presentation of Joseph can in fact be seen to be governed by the role according to which he must be recognized, if one makes two assumptions not only about the Qurʾān as a book but about books in general: 1) The parts should always be readable in terms of a vision and reading of the whole; and 2) when examples of particular types of characters are presented, their representation both reflects a larger idea of their type and also contributes to its formation.

A simple collating and analysis of all generic or proper mentions of Messengers in the Qurʾān produces a fairly clear and oft-repeated set of salient characteristics. But because the set has been constructed from mentions of both

¹⁷ Alter sees type-scenes as providing this ability to Biblical authors.

those called (*nabī*) and those sent (*rasūl*), not all characteristics apply equally to all figures.¹⁸

1. Each is to be seen as part of a large set of individuals—each of whom has a degree of individuality and an appropriate skill but who is also like all others in fundamental ways.

2. Each is guided by God, but guidance is parceled out as needed.

3. They are chosen by God, usually from among their own people, without seeking to be chosen. Connected with this, their mortality is constantly stressed; in the terminology of the modern religionist, they are instrumental messengers. In particular, the Qur’ān takes pains to distinguish them from angels—who are presented as some kind of medial heavenly figure—not God but also recognizable as man. Their humanity and instrumentality in turn emphasize God’s power.

4. They often polarize their audiences—being opposed by some and believed by others. Those who oppose them may physically harm them or expel them, but more often call them liars; such belying is closely associated in Qur’anic semantics with *kufṛ* (ingratitude). They oppose ancestral custom to *tawḥīd* (declaring God’s oneness) and are in turn opposed by Satan.

5. They have two major functions—to bring good tidings and to warn—both of which involve explaining God’s clear signs.

6. They have a constellation of exemplary personal characteristics: patience, unswerving devotion, compassion, trust in God, pure faith absolutely opposed to associating (*shirk*) anything with God.

7. Obeying them is not separate from the need to obey God and believe in His Book, the Angels, and the Last Day.

The Qur’anic story of Joseph is structured to emphasize his fit with these characteristics, which in turn are related to other key elements in the Qur’anic worldview. The story has a circular shape—its opening is echoed in its closing; in each an explicit motive is given for its telling—it is a sign of God’s intentions for humanity and a lesson (*ibra*). Because of this familiar Qur’anic motive for story-telling, the opening event (1) functions in a different way from the way it functions in the Bible. There the dream prefigures and advances the action, by the father’s warning Joseph that it would make his brothers jealous, among other things. In the Qur’ān it functions not primarily as an action advancer but as a sign, like the entire story of which it is a part, that God’s will shall be fulfilled no matter what. The father gives it that meaning explicitly.

The clearest evidence of the Qur’ān’s totally different orientation is the role the sub-plot of the master’s wife plays in the story as a whole and what it reveals of Joseph’s character as a messenger. This episode also marks the widest divergence from the Biblical telling and demonstrates how the Qur’ān is making different use of available materials, no matter what their sources. As a result of what emerges from the Qur’ān’s use of this sub-plot, Joseph appears more dependent

¹⁸ For a discussion of the usage of *nabī* and *rasul* in the Qur’ān, see Willem A. Bijlefeld, “A Profit And More Than A Profit?,” *MW*, LIX (1969), 9–28.

on God *Himself*, rather than on His plan, and less *invested* with the ability to carry out God's will on his own (7-10). In fact, this episode in the Qur'ān has Joseph save another person, the wife, before saving himself, and thereby has him show himself even more to be the instrument of God (10).

A detailed exploration of the Qur'ān's handling of this incident will help expand the argument. In the Bible, Joseph's attractiveness to his father contributes to his brothers' resentment (1). His handsomeness and attractiveness to Potiphar's wife serve, through her lies, to get him into prison (even though out of his innate strength of character he yields not at all to her advances) so that he could be brought out of prison to prosper and "redeem" his family (6-7, 11). After he is imprisoned, the wife does not figure in again, having served her purposes in the narrative.

In the Qur'ān, the story of the wife is more inconclusive, oriented toward exploring and explaining Joseph's sexual attractiveness in very human terms, less clear about how or whether the encounter actually leads to his imprisonment (7-8). More specifically, in the Qur'ān, the wife is the wife of Joseph's buyer, "Azīz," who has her install Joseph in their house, perhaps even to be adopted by them (6). His stay there is used to teach him the dream interpretation he will need, although it is kept secret for the time being (6). According to the Qur'ān, the wife solicits Joseph, closing him into her room with her. And, the Qur'ān states, he would have taken her had he not seen God's signs not to do so (7). Forewarned of his all too human tendency to succumb, he runs to the door; as the wife grabs him, she tears his shirt from behind. At the door he meets his master, his seducer's husband, who refuses to believe his own wife's lie that Joseph seduced her (because one of his kin witnesses to the contrary and because the shirt has been torn from behind), urging her instead to ask God's forgiveness for the sin she has committed by accusing someone falsely of adultery (7).

For the Qur'ān, the story does not stop there. Certain of the women of the city blame the wife in their gossip, but the wife contrives to show them how tempting Joseph really is (7). She invites them to her house, presumably to eat, because when each has a knife in her hand, it has been arranged for them to glimpse this handsome youth (whom they mistake for an angel), whereupon they lose control of themselves enough to cut their hands with the knives.¹⁹ Having made them empathize with her lust, she admits that she has solicited him but votes to have him imprisoned if she cannot have him. Joseph prays to God to turn him away from their guile but is imprisoned anyway, again for an unexplained reason (8). Often in the Qur'ān, not everything has to be explained.²⁰

When, two steps later in the narrative, Joseph receives a summons from the king which can release him from prison, he refuses to leave until he is finally

¹⁹ See Lasine, "The Functions," pp. 9-10, for another discussion of these differences.

²⁰ The inclusion of details known to have existed in other Joseph stories without explaining them thoroughly has a number of possible explanations, among which is the idea that the listener did not require explanation or was so familiar with various possible details of the story that they could be used without explanation. It could also be argued that the failure to explain and name reinforces the Qur'ān's claim to be telling the "real" story, stripped of its particularistic associations.

cleared with the women—she who seduced him as well as those whom she corrupted (10). His former master’s wife confesses, attributing no responsibility to God for her actions and all credit to Him for allowing her to correct her more evil human tendencies. Joseph then leaves prison to rise in the king’s service (11).

This incident, which is treated very differently in the two tellings, is located at the center of the Qur’anic story. Its significance is also central to Qur’anic theology as a whole, illustrative of the intimate and constant relationship between the “instrumental” messenger and his God; the problematic struggle between human and/or Satanic action and Divine will, which is one of the Qur’ān’s most productive tensions or paradoxes; the twin human potential for understanding of God’s will and for profound ignorance of it; and the process of revelation itself.

Throughout, the story emphasizes these key elements in the Qur’anic worldview. It is said to be related as a sign to all those who are able to understand (1). When Joseph relates his initial dream while tending his flocks, his father (who has a shrewd serenity unlike his frail and anxious Biblical counterpart) warns him not to tell it to his brothers, lest Satan cause them to injure him (2). His father knows God’s plan well enough to be able to explain to him that God will someday choose Joseph and give him the art of dream interpretation so that he can bring blessing to his family (the House of Jacob) just as God has helped Abraham and Isaac to do before (2). This is, by the way, the only allusion to genealogy in the story, but one which singles out certain figures as forming a chain of God’s servants.

God is ever-present in the narrative, his cosmic omnipresence thus underscored. As the brothers put Joseph into the pit, God reveals to him that someday he will tell them what they have done (4). Even the brothers’ jealousy is viewed as a sign (3). When the brothers bring back falsified evidence of what they have done, the father is suspicious and puts his trust in God, telling them that they have been tempted by “spirits.” The travelers who find Joseph try to hide him, but the Qur’ān reminds us that God knows what they are doing. After Joseph is established in the buyer’s house, God reminds the listener again that He has established Joseph and is about to make him prosper according to His purposes. His linking His reward to Joseph with the reward He gives to *all* good-doers is yet another indication of the Qur’anic impulse to generalize its stories. The hiddenness of God’s plan from most human beings is thereby transformed from a sign of His protectiveness over Israel to a sign of the willful ignorance of humankind. Joseph’s spurning of the wife is taken as an indication of his being one of God’s devoted servants, one who can be turned away from his natural but disreputable human proclivities. About to be imprisoned, perhaps (but not necessarily) because of the women’s guile, Joseph tells God that he prefers the prison of walls to the prison of wrong-doing, not wishing to be one of the ignorant.²¹ God supports him in his good intention, and confirms it.

²¹ In the Qur’ān as a whole, being hidden and being ungrateful and being unfaithful are semantically linked. See Marilyn Robinson Waldman, “The Concept of *Kufr* in the Qur’an,” *JAOS*, LXXXVIII (1965), 442–55.

On this level, the story gives a masterful account of the Qur'ān's psychologically subtle understanding of the relationship between human will and God's power, a subtlety lost on many later theologians. When Joseph interprets the dreams of two youths imprisoned with him, he does so because they ask, associating his special abilities with his being a recognizable good-doer. A small but interesting difference from the Biblical account occurs at this point: In the Bible, the butler who was to remember Joseph after prison just forgets; his youthful counterpart in the Qur'ān, whose occupation is characteristically unspecified, is made to forget by Satan (9).

When Joseph is about to do the interpretation, he uses the forthcoming demonstration of his God-given ability as an occasion to sermonize about *tawhīd* and *shirk*, as well as to link the worship of the one God to the tradition of his ancestors—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Once again, when the brothers return home from seeing Joseph the first time, having been instructed by him to bring back a certain, unnamed brother, the father is suspicious until he sees a sign from Joseph. He, too, uses this as an occasion to sermonize on God's power, urging his sons to put their trust in Him and underlining his own similarity to Joseph (13). Jacob then tells them how to enter Joseph's house. Although his intention in so doing is left unclear, we are again reminded that the knowledge behind his request has been given to him by God.

When Joseph's brothers have returned to Egypt and he has revealed himself to them and had them bring back father *and* mother (not just father as in the Torah), the circle of the story's structure is closed (prematurely for the Bible) by Joseph's summary of the key points of God's involvement in his life and his father's: God's giving him the initial dream, bringing him out of prison, and bringing his father out of the desert. Any troubles Joseph has had in his life, he attributes not to God but to Satan (18).

The Qur'ān does not continue the story beyond this point, as does the Bible, to chronicle the rest of Joseph's life. It ends, rather, with a longish homily about the way in which such tales are signs of God's power and judgment as well as vehicles for revelation, just as are the Messengers who bring (or live) them (19). The Qur'ān is interested mainly in Joseph's role as exemplary God-fearing man and Messenger.

Finally, in the last few verses (S. 12:110ff.) we are reminded by allusion that a salient feature in the lives of all Messengers (especially Muḥammad) was also exemplified in Joseph:

Till, when the Messengers despaired, deeming they were counted liars, Our help came to them and whosoever We willed was delivered. Our might will never be turned back from the people of the sinners. In their stories is surely a lesson to men possessed of minds; it is not a tale forged, but a confirmation of what is before it, and a distinguishing of everything, and a guidance, and a mercy to a people who believe.²²

²² S. 12:110ff. Arthur J. Arberry, tr., *The Koran Interpreted* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 238.

At this point, the way in which the wife’s story has been structured takes on a new dimension. Messengers who are clearly telling the truth, even according to some witnesses, can still suffer from being given the lie by the ignorant. “Belying” is, of course, a key point in the Qur’anic understanding of the challenge of Messengership and the nature of faithlessness (*kufr*), and of the constant opposition of *taṣḍīq* and *takdhīb* in the making of a Messenger.

Thus does the story of Joseph show itself to be a vision rather than a version. And thus does it come to illustrate a number of truths, not just about Messengers, but about all human beings in their relationship with God. Except for what God gives Joseph, and his own will to serve God, Joseph is not extraordinary. He even could be said to appear a bit wide-eyed and ingenuous, with the same natural human failings and God-given ability to correct them that even the errant wife and her cohort possess. Even his illustrious ancestry and genealogy are set into a universal context.

It is now possible to restate and answer the questions raised in the beginning: Is it helpful to think of the Qur’anic Joseph as a version of the Biblical one? Not if it precludes us from approaching both as equally “basic” tellings whose “real” form logically can never exist apart from a given telling.

Is it necessary to be aware of the Biblical story, or forms of it that might have been current in Muḥammad’s milieu, in order to understand the Qur’anic one? Not unless we are prepared to compare the two scriptures in order to discover the integrity of each. An affinity between the two exists only to an extent; formal similarities do not necessarily mean they tell the same story in a thematic, moral, or theological sense.

It is ironic that retrieving the integrity of the Qur’anic story seems to have required suspending the claim of each scripture to be telling the “real” Joseph story. Yet the concomitant awareness that each is equally basic may prepare the way for mutually sympathetic understanding.

Concerning exegesis, the sociologist Edward Shils observed:

In the field of religious knowledge, the revisions of the understanding of the sacred text are not understood as innovations; they are byproducts of the quest for better understanding. The truth is already present in the sacred text and it is the task of the student to elicit it by interpretation. An innovation in interpretation does not imply an innovation in the sacred text; it is a better disclosure of what was already there.²³

One of the remarkable characteristics of sacred texts (and one they share with a very small body of secular literary compositions) is that, read either in a community of faith or in another respectful and admiring context, they can prompt the reader to seek almost endlessly what Shils calls “a better disclosure of what was already there.” But it is difficult to disclose what was already there if one concentrates on what was not.

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²³ Edward Shils, *Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 8.