

JAAKKO HÄMEEN-ANTTILA

'WE WILL TELL YOU THE BEST OF STORIES'
A STUDY ON SURAH XII

The Surah of Joseph (XII) is the only integral narrative in the Qur'ān, and the earliest of the few examples of Early Arabic prose narratives of some length with artistic (as well as religious) values¹. This makes it vitally important for the study of the birth and development of Arabic narrative prose. The Surah is also of special interest as it is explicitly defined as a good story by the text itself (v. 3 *aḥsan al-qaṣaṣ*).—The aim of the following study is to gain an insight into the text, its structure and stylistic devices, and to contribute towards understanding what makes the Surah "the best of stories".

In studying the structure and the narrative devices of the Surah, I have given some attention, mainly in footnotes, to a selection of later versions—both of (semi)popular and learned origin—of the story of Joseph, as their authors have to a certain extent used, consciously or not, the same devices that are used in the Surah. The versions that are here used, are (in chronological order):

1. The Persian epic *Yūsuf va-Zulaykhā*², which is often but mistakenly attributed to Firdawsī, but is in fact slightly later, probably from the 11th century³.

2. The story of Joseph in Arabic verse, edited by Ebied and Young⁴. The manuscript is probably from the 13th or 14th century⁵, and contains a semipopular version written in Middle Arabic. The manuscript has half a dozen lacunae.

3. Poema de Yuçuf, an *aljamiado* text⁶ of high artistic value (called by Menéndez Pidal "la obra capital de toda la literatura *aljamiada*") copied in the 14th century and composed in the 'cuaderna via'. The extant version is defective and the story ends with the Gossip scene⁷.

¹ Other Early Arabic narrative texts with artistic values can be found among the anecdotes, whether in anecdote collections or in works of other genres (e.g. biographical and historical works), and the later *maqāmas*.—The other stories in the Qur'ān are remarkably shorter and lack the narrative qualities of Surah Joseph.

² Only the first part of which has been available to me (the incomplete edition of Ethé).

³ Cf. e.g. A. Pagliaro – A. Bausani, *La letteratura persiana. Le letterature del mondo*. Milano 1968, p. 389.

⁴ As their edition leaves much to be desired, the review of Beeston (*BSOAS* 40, 1977:287-296) should be taken into account, though it, too, gives only part of the necessary corrections.

⁵ See Ebied – Young, p. 1.

⁶ Old Spanish/Aragonese written in Arabic characters.

⁷ For the division into scenes or episodes, cf. below.—Of a similar character but based on Jewish traditions and written in Hebrew characters is the *Coplas de José*.

4. La Leyenda de Yūsuf, another aljamiado text. The manuscript is probably from the 16th century, and it contains a prose translation of an as yet unidentified Arabic original⁸.

5. L'Histoire de Joseph, another semipopular version from the 16th century. The text itself has not been published, so that I have been obliged to quote it from the French translation of Croisier⁹.

All these versions show some common features, among which one could mention the tendency to elaborate the story, mainly with material originally taken from Jewish popular tradition, while retaining the underlying basic structure of the Qur'ānic story.

The integrity of the Surah has often been questioned. Already in the traditional Qur'ānic science some of its verses were ascribed to a later period; the Kūfic tradition attributed verses 1-3 and 7 to the Medinan period¹⁰. European scholars have also questioned the authenticity of some of its verses¹¹.

As the Surah is clearly tripartite (vv. 1-3 Prologue; vv. 4-101 Story; vv. 102-111 Epilogue), it is advisable to inspect these parts separately.

Vv. 1-3 constitute the necessary opening to the Surah: few Surahs¹² simply begin with a Prophet story without any formal preliminaries. Vv. 1-2 contain the usual Book allusion¹³ which functionally replaces the oaths of the earlier periods. The verses do not have anything to do with the *Story* of Joseph, but they are necessary for the *Surah*¹⁴. V. 3 on the other hand introduces the subject matter and is a necessary transitional link between the opening formula and the story¹⁵. Verses in the narrator's voice (3, 7 etc.) are interspersed throughout the Surah and have a clear purpose: they remind the reader/listener of God's active role in the action and point out the moral message of the story without which it would simply be one of the *asāfir al-*

⁸ The whole text, with its un-Spanish syntax, could well be called a gigantesque calque; in many passages, especially in the translations of the Qur'ān, the Arabic syntax shines clearly through, e.g. p. 5 "el šol šino a mi i por la lluna a bueštro padre..." which must come from an Arabic original *wa-ammā l-qamar fa-abūkum*.

⁹ There are also several other Islamic versions of the story, most of which are still unpublished.

¹⁰ *ET*², article Kur'ān, p. 416 (A.T. Welch).—V. 7, a phrase directed to Muḥammad amidst a narrative has ample parallels within the Qur'ān, cf. e.g. aṭ-Ṭūfī, 'Alam al-ḡadhal fī 'ilm al-ḡadhal (ed. W. Heinrichs, Bibliotheca Islamica 32, 1987), p. 136 (on Qur. 11:35). Some of the Khāriḡites rejected the whole Surah due to its erotic and entertaining nature, seen as inappropriate to the serene Book of Allah by His more fervent partisans.

¹¹ E.g. Bell sees vv. 1-2 and 3 as two alternative openings to the Surah (R. Bell, *The Qur'ān*, 1937 (repr. 1960), I:217). Yahuda (Fs. Goldziher, quoted in R. Paret, *Der Koran. Kommentar und Konkordanz*. 2. Stuttgart 1980, p. 247) has erred furthest with his "corrections" of the order of verses, interpolations etc., a result of working absorbed in the tradition of 19th century European short stories. This procedure finds parallels in the earlier tendency to reorganize pre-Islamic poems to make them fit with 19th century European ideas of what lyrical poetry is and should be.

¹² Cf. e.g. 70:1 sa'ala sā'ilun bi-'adhābin wāqi'.—The beginning of Surah Joseph is closely paralleled by Surah 28:1-5.

¹³ Cf. W. Montgomery Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'ān*, Edinburgh 1970, pp. 142-143.

¹⁴ We must make a distinction between Surah Joseph and the Story of Joseph: material extraneous to the Story may not be extraneous to the Surah.

¹⁵ The different functional role of vv. 1-2 and 3 has already been recognized by Neuwirth, p. 139.

awwalīn ("stories of olden times") told just for its entertainment value. Thus these verses, though extraneous to the Story, have a well defined function in the Surah, which could hardly be thought of without them¹⁶.

In the main part of the Surah (vv. 4-101) only few verses call for comment here¹⁷. First of all, it should be noted that what was said above of the narrator's comments, especially the *kadhālika*-phrases¹⁸, and their importance, is equally true for Joseph's Prison Sermon (vv. 37b-40) which is the central point of the Story (cf. below). Four verses in the Surah draw our attention due to a change of rhyme, viz. v. 39 (-ār), 41 (-ān), 65 (-īr), and 66 (-īl), but none of them can be taken as a later addition¹⁹: vv. 65-66 are an integral part of the action—both have links to the surrounding verses; v. 39 could easily have been rhymed with the rest of the Surah by picking any of God's epithets rhyming in -īm²⁰; and v. 41 gives the necessary solution for vv. 36-40²¹. In v. 89 the words *wa-akhīhi* are superfluous, but they are a mechanical formula (cf. v. 8 *la-Yūsufu wa-akhūhu*; v. 87 *min Yūsufa wa-akhīhi*; and v. 90 *anā Yūsufu wa-hādhā akhī*) rather than a later addition: as nothing is gained by them, their addition would be totally unnecessary and unmotivated²².

The Epilogue (vv. 102-111) differs considerably from the rest of the Surah, as will be shown later. Whether a part²³ of it stems from a later time than the rest of the Surah is difficult to say as the Surah for its length and single subject matter has no parallels in the Qur'ān. It has been maintained that most of the Epilogue is a later addition (Bell, pp. 217 and 226-227), but there is no compelling reason to assume such a laconic style in the Epilogue; exhortatory verses, even though they be patched together from standard formulae as here, fit well with the general tenor of the Qur'ān. They may be irrelevant to the Story, but certainly not to the Surah with its emphatic monotheistic message, a message repeated time after another in the Qur'ān with but little variation.

A carefully executed later redaction, as assumed by Premare, pp. 166-167, is of course always possible in any piece of literature, but as long as there is no unambiguous evidence for it, such a theory remains purely hypothetical and offers no basis for further studies. Thus, it is better to assume a uniform composition for the whole of the Surah until contrary evidence is adduced.

¹⁶ Most of the later versions omit the Prologue and the Epilogue and confine themselves to the Story.

¹⁷ Bell, p. 217, sees the whole Benjamin story as interpolated but this hypothesis finds little support in the Surah. For his view of the composition of Surah Joseph, see Bell, pp. 217-227.

¹⁸ On which see Premare, p. 117ff.

¹⁹ Note also that a differing rhyme need not mean that verse is a later addition, and that it would have been easy to find words rhyming with the rest of the Surah.

²⁰ V. 39 is, it has to be admitted, a rather short verse, but if it were combined with v. 40, the resulting verse would be overlong.

²¹ It would be rash to explain the differing rhyme here by assuming an original *tastaftūn* (pl. for dual), even though the dual was less used in pre-Classical Arabic than one is given to understand by the classical grammarians.

²² For an attempt to explain *wa-akhīhi*, see e.g. *az-Zamakhsharī II:273*.

²³ As an Epilogue is needed to round out the Surah, which otherwise would end abruptly and without a parallel to the Prologue, the whole Epilogue can of course not be a later addition.

Lexicon as an integrating factor

One of the most important means of creating integrity within the Surah, besides of course its single subject matter, is the use (conscious or unconscious) of lexical links. In Surah Joseph we have an unusual number of lexical links and recurrent words. This tight net of lexical interrelations²⁴ holds the episodes—which, as will be seen, seldom contain transitional links—of the Surah together. These links are of two kinds²⁵. Of lesser importance as stylistic devices are the words which are closely connected with the subject matter (e.g. the names of the dramatis personae) and thus dependent on it. Their existence does not say anything of the composition of the Surah, though they of course evoke a feeling of integrity in the listener. The lexical links between thematically unrelated passages are more important for the coherence of the Surah, i.e. words which are not dependent on the subject matter, and the recurrent use of which is a stylistic device.

An exhaustive analysis of the lexicon of Surah Joseph would be out of place here. Suffice it to draw attention to some²⁶ of the more significant words and roots²⁷. In brackets is the total number of occurrences in the Qur'ān when relevant. Words/roots attested only in Surah Joseph are in italics. Words and phrases repeated in the same or closely succeeding verses (e.g. sab^c baqarāt; quddat) are not listed:

R'Y (of dreaming; especially ru'yā): 5, 36 (twice), 43 (thrice), 100. Cf. also ahlām, v. 44 twice.

KYD (35): 5, 28, 33, 34, 50, 52, 76.

ta'wīl (17): 6, 21, 36, 37, 44, 45, 100, 101 (ta'wīl al-aḥādīth in v. 6, 21, 101).

ʿuṣba (4): 8, 14.

ḡubb (2): 10, 15 (both ghayābat al-ḡubb).

sayyārat- (3): 10, 19. Cf. also ʿir.

SBQ VIII (5): 17, 25²⁸.

(an ya'kulahu dh-dhi'b: 13, 14, 17. Cf. ta'kulu ṭ-ṭayr, v. 41.)

matā^c 'things'²⁹: 17, 65, 79.

qamīṣ (6): 18, 25, 26, 27, 28, 93³⁰.

²⁴ For an analysis of lexical links in pre-Islamic poetry, see M. Bateson, *Structural continuity in poetry*. Paris—The Hague 1970.—Lexical links are also used to some extent in the Biblical story of Joseph, cf. Rendsburg, p. 119.

²⁵ The words common throughout the Qur'ān are not taken into account as their cohesive force is minimal (an extreme example would be *wa-*).

²⁶ Earlier researchers have pointed to a few of these words, e.g. Neuwirth in her *Zur Struktur*, p. 147 (ḡahhaza, ma'ādha llāhi and ḡashā li-llāhi).

²⁷ Besides words and roots, some grammatical forms lend cohesion to the Surah. Thus e.g. duals, especially in verbs: v. 25 (twice, Joseph and Zulaykhā), v. 37 (the fellow prisoners), 41 (the fellow prisoners); others: v. 6, 36 (twice), 37 (four times), 39, 41 (twice), 42, 45, 99, 100. Note also the use of pl. 2/3 f. several times in vv. 31-51, and the similar syntax of ṣabrun ḡamīlun (vv. 18, 83) and aḡḡhāthu ahlāmin (v. 44), both of which contain a "khabar maḡdhūf mubtada'uhu", and the construction qāla qā'ilun min (v. 10), shahida shāhidun min (v. 26) and adhdhana mu'adhdhinun (v. 70).

²⁸ For this verb, cf. Rosenthal. Note that the *Leyenda* (p. 14) translates this passage with *nošotroš noš abanšemoš*, and is the only text where it is understood in accordance with Rosenthal's hypothesis.

²⁹ *Matā^c* is in itself a common word in the Qur'ān, but it is almost exclusively used in a religious sense (as in *matā^c ad-dunyā*). In a profane sense it is used some dozen times.

³⁰ As is well known, the shirt of Joseph has an important role in the story, and a net of legends is woven around it in the *tafāsīr*. It is adduced thrice in the Story (18, 25-28, 93) as evidence of 1. that the wolf has eaten Joseph (lie), 2. that Joseph did not attempt to rape Zulaykhā (truth), and 3. that Joseph is

sawwala (4): 18, 83 (both in bal sawwalat lakum anfusukum amran).

(fa-ṣabrun ḡamīlun: 18, 83, and cf. yaṣbir, v. 90.)

KDHB³¹: 18, 26, 27, 74, 110.

biḡā'at (5): 19, 62, 65 (twice), 88.

asarra: 19, 77.

mathwā (13): 21, 23.

MKN: 21, 54, 55.

imra'at-/niswat-: 21, 30 (twice), 50, 51.

rāwada (8)³²: 23, 26, 30, 32, 51 (twice), 61.

bāb/abwāb: 23, 25, 67 (twice).

ma'ādha llāhi (2): 23, 79.

rabb (of an earthly lord³³): 23, 41, 42 (twice), 50³⁴.

SĠN (10)³⁵: 25, 32, 33, 35, 36, 39, 41, 42, 100.

MKR: 31, 102. Cf. KYD, above.

hāshā li-llāhi (2): 31, 51. Cf. also ma'ādha llāhi, above, and ta-llāhi, below.

qaṭṭa'a (12)³⁶: 31, 50.

NB': 36, 37, 45, 102.

ṣāšara 'to press wine'³⁷: 36, 49.

alive (truth). This together with its healing powers lends it a supernatural status.—Note also Croisier, p. 195, which tells how Joseph later rent Zulaykhā's shirt when they were married.

³¹ Frequent also in other parts of the Qur'ān, but one of the key words of the Surah which is in a way a story of truth and falsehood.

³² Especially interesting is the use of this verb in v. 61 (the brothers "seduce" Benjamin from Jacob) where its selection seems to be less due to its semantic field than its recurrent use in other parts of the Surah.

³³ In this sense rabb is used rarely in the Qur'ān. In 12:23 and in the latter occurrence of 12:42, rabb could also be taken as referring to God, but in both cases it is more natural to take it as referring to Potiphar and the Pharaoh, respectively, though one is tempted to connect 12:23 (innahu rabbī aḡsana mathwāya) with 12:100 (...rabbī ... wa-qad aḡsana bī idh ...). Many later versions, e.g. Croisier, pp. 175-176 and Ebied – Young, v. 283ff., use in 12:42 both the possibilities (note that Ebied and Young misunderstand the crucial verse 283, and Beeston's correction, p. 295, is inadequate. Translate: "Mention me—and be not forgetful—to your lord ..."). It seems that the later interpretations of 12:42 as referring to God are at least partly due to a reluctance to accept the use of rabb in the meaning 'earthly lord' in *divine narrative*: other attestations of it are in dialogue between the characters.—The recurrence of rabb in this meaning is all the more significant as there would have been no dearth of other words meaning 'king' etc. (e.g. malik).

³⁴ In the commentaries rabbī in vv. 23 and 42 is usually explained with sayyidī, i.e. Potiphar, though the other possibility (God) is also often mentioned. See e.g. al-Ġalālayn (which even takes inna rabbī bi-kaydihinna 'aḡim, v. 50, as referring to the Pharaoh!); Ibn Qutayba, Tafsīr, p. 217 (which also quotes a verse by al-A'šhā where rabbī is used of a king); al-Farrā' II:14 and 46; Ibn Kathīr I:331 and 338; al-Bayḡāwī III:130 and 134; az-Zamakhsharī II:248 and 257.

³⁵ Siġġin (twice in Surah 83) is not taken into account here.

³⁶ Mīr writes on this verb (p. 2, note 3): "And it is too often forgotten that vs. 31 contains the word qaṭṭa'na, which is intensive and implies takthīr ("frequency") and takrīr ("repetition"), being thus completely unsuitable for an accidental cutting of hands".—This argument is of course untenable, as it is well known that in many transitive I stem verbs, the verb reacts to plurality of object by becoming II stem. This is common in the Qur'ān, cf. e.g. 5:33 (aw tuqaṭṭa'a aydīhim wa-argūluhum: several pairs of hands and feet) as against 5:38 (wa's-sāriqu wa's-sāriqatu fa-ḡta'ū aydiyahumā: only two pairs), and 2:49 (yudhabbiḡūna abnā'akum "they kill [better than slaughter] your sons").—Less commonly known is that a transitive IV stem reacts in the same way, cf. Abū Zayd, Nawādir (ed. M. A. Aḡmad, Dār ash-Shurūq 1981), p. 522, and in the Qur'ān, cf. al-Bayḡāwī III:130 (on ghallaqati l-abwāba), and az-Zamakhsharī II:267 (on adhdhana).

³⁷ In this sense only in Surah Joseph. There are three other cases of ṣṢR (ṣaṣr and ṣṢR IV twice) in the Qur'ān but in a different sense.—Note the variant in 12:49 which reads ṣṢR IV, cf. e.g. al-ṢUkbarī,

FRQ V act. part.³⁸: 39, 47.

aftā, istaftā: 41, 43, 46.

NGY 'to save': 42, 45, 110.

KHLŞ: 24, 54, 80.

ġahhaza (and ġahāz) (2+2): 59, 70.

KYL (16): 59, 60, 63 (twice), 65 (twice), 88.

raḥlriḥāl (3)³⁹: 62, 70, 75,

mawthiq (3): 66 (twice), 80.

ʿīr (3): 70, 82, 94. Cf. also sayyārat-, above.

SRQ (9): 70, 73, 77 (twice), 82.

ta-llāhi (9)⁴⁰: 73, 85, 91, 95. Cf. also maʿādha llāhi and ḥāshā li-llāhi, above.

As this list⁴¹ shows, the Story is tightly knit together with the recurrent use of several lexemes. It can hardly be maintained that the repetition of these words would not create a feeling of unity in the mind of the listener. It should be noted that almost all the significant lexical links generate cohesion *within the Story*, whereas the Prologue and the Epilogue are relatively isolated from the rest of the Surah⁴².

That these key words—or at least some of them—have been felt characteristic to the story of Joseph, is shown by their reappearance in later versions and in allusions to the Surah. The following gives a list of some of these words in later versions, without striving towards completeness:

KYD (kayd): Retained in e.g. pseudo-Firdawsī, v. 1268, 1842, 1970, 3697 (twice).

ʿuṣba: Cf. the ḥadīth quoted in al-Bukhārī II:216, where we also have BR' II, istaghfirī, and in the answer of ʿĀ'isha a conscious reference to "Abū Yūsuf". The whole ḥadīth and its imagery has been triggered by the word ʿuṣba in the Qur'ānic quotation (24:11) to which the ḥadīth has been attached. Cf. also Abū Nuwās, Dīwān (Dār Ṣādir), p. 96 (rhyme -bu), where we have on ll. 3-4 ikhwat, ʿuṣbat-, and kadhabū. In the Leyenda this word—which is translated with konpanna—has found its way even to several translations of other Qur'ānic quotations: the translation of 12:9 (p. 5: matad a Yusuf ... i šereiš konpanna) is perhaps based on a text *wa-antum ʿuṣba (instead of wa-takūnū min baʿdihi qawman ṣāliḥīn). Similarly, p. 6 konpanna (de) perdidoš for 12:14 innā idhan la-khāsirūna; p. 54 yo e leššado ll-almila de konpanna ke ... for 12:37 millata qawmin; p. 85 bošotroš šoiš mala konpanna for 12:77 sharrun makānan; p. 92 konpanna de ġāhileš for 12:89 idh antum ġāhilūna. The brothers are called a konpanna also in other passages (e.g. p. 72 and 78), but as the word is quite frequent in Old Spanish and Aragonese, its appearance outside the Qur'ānic

Tibyān, p. 735, al-Bayḍāwī III:135, and az-Zamakhsharī II:260.

³⁸ Act. part. only in Surah Joseph.

³⁹ From RḤL we have only one other attestation in the Qur'ān, viz. riḥlat- in 106:2.

⁴⁰ The other occurrences are 16:56, 16:63, 21:57, 26:97 and 37:56.

⁴¹ Note also the recurrent rhyme phrase wa-lākinna akthara n-nāsi lā yaʿlamūna 12:21, 40 and 68, and wa-lākinna akthara n-nāsi lā yashkurūna

⁴² Neuwirth, p. 139, writes: "Die nicht wenigen deutlichen Rückbezüge des III. [i.e. the Epilogue] auf den II. Teil [i.e. the Story] können hier nicht im einzelnen besprochen werden...". This seems to me an overstatement as there are in fact relatively few meaningful links between the Story and the Epilogue, fewer in fact than between the Epilogue and certain Medinan passages (cf. below).

quotations is not particularly significant.

ğubb: The word alğub/alchub—itself fairly common in Old Catalan⁴³—is used in the *Leyenda* for the well of Joseph. The other word for well, 'poso', is used only a few times (e.g. p. 17), though in *Poema de Yūsuf* (strophe 21) and *Coplas de José poço* is used instead, as čāh in pseudo-Firdawsī (passim, e.g. v. 1324, 1687).—Note that the word ğubb seems to be a foreign—and if it was felt foreign, a significant—word also in the Qur'ān itself⁴⁴; the normal word for 'well' being of course bi'r.—The word ğubb is retained throughout in most commentaries when speaking of the well of Joseph, with the notable exception of az-Zamakhsharī, who often uses the word bi'r (II:245, 264, 277).

sayyārat-: The word, which is not common in Persian in this sense, has been retained in pseudo-Firdawsī, v. 1325 sayyāragān, and v. 2453 sayyāra.

şabrun ğamīlun: Very often associated with Jacob in later literature. Be it sufficient to quote pseudo-Firdawsī, v. 2094 ki dar kārḥā şabr bāşhad ğamīl.

rāwada: The construction has been retained in some of the translations. Cf. *Leyenda*, e.g. p. 46 ella me rrekirio a mi de mi preşona, and in the translation of 12:61 (of Benjamin) noş lo rrekiriremoş a el de şu padre; pseudo-Firdawsī, v. 3674 marā ū kaşīd-ast az khwīştan, an unnatural construction in Persian.

ma'ādha llāhi: The original Arabic retained in *Leyenda*, p. 42, and pseudo-Firdawsī, v. 2042 (spoken by the wolf!), 3392 and 3614 (latter two by Joseph). See also al-Ġalālayn on v. 58 (by the brothers) = Ibn Kathīr I:346 = al-Bayḍāwī III:137 = az-Zamakhsharī II:264.

ğahhaza: Cf. e.g. *Ebied - Young*, v. 431, which has one more tağhīz.

Pseudo-Firdawsī has even been able to work the recurrent rhyme phrase wa-lākinna akthara n-nāsi lā ya'lamūna as a hemistich into his poem with only one minor alteration (v. 2906): va-līk akthara n-nāsi lā ya'lamūn! We also find ikhwān, besides barādarān, throughout pseudo-Firdawsī, e.g. vv. 1202, 1288, 3023.

The Epilogue (vv. 102-111)

The Epilogue of the Surah differs manifestly from the Story (vv. 4-101). Whereas the Story is, for the most part, composed with words and phrases peculiar to Surah Joseph (although there are of course a number of formulae—especially the pious formulae in the end of the verses, and the religious phraseology of the Prison Sermon), the Epilogue is instead full of formulae recurrent throughout the Qur'ān, and could almost be said to have been patched together from ready-made phrases. The following list gives the text of the Epilogue compared with similar formulae and phrases elsewhere in the Qur'ān:

102 <dhālika min anbā'i l-ghaybi nūḥīhi ilayka wa-mā kunta ladayhim idh> aġma'ū amrahum wa-hum yumkirūn.

⁴³ Cf. J. Coromines, *Diccionari etimològic i complementeri de la llengua catalana*. 5.a edició, vol. I. Barcelona 1988 (s.v. aljub).

⁴⁴ Cf. A. Jeffery, *The foreign vocabulary of the Qur'ān*. Baroda 1938, pp. 98-99. It is attested already in Nabatean texts, see *Grundriss der arabischen Philologie I* (1982), p. 31 (W.W. Müller).

<=3:44>. Cf. also 11:49 (tilka min anbā'i l-ghaybi nūḥīhi ilayka mā kunta...), and 11:100 (dhālika min anbā'i l-qurā naquṣṣuhu 'alayka). Cf. also 20:99.

103 wa-mā aktharu n-nāsi wa-law ḥaraṣta bi-mu'minīn.

Cf. e.g. 13:1 (wa-lākinna akthara n-nāsi lā yu'minūn), 26:8 (and seven other occurrences in Surah XXVI, wa-mā kāna aktharuhum mu'minīn) etc.

104 wa-mā tas'aluhum 'alayhi min aḡrin in huwa illā dhikrun li'l-'ālamīn.

Cf. 6:90 (lā as'alukum 'alayhi aḡran in huwa illā dhikrun li'l-'ālamīn), 38:86-87 (mā as'alukum 'alayhi min aḡrin ... in huwa illā dhikrun li'l-'ālamīn). Cf. also 26:145, 26:164, 26:180, 34:47, and 11:51, 36:21, 42:23.

105 wa-ka-ayyin min āyatīn fī s-samāwāti wa'l-arḍi yamurrūna 'alayhā wa-hum 'anhā mu'riḍūn.

For ka-ayyin min X + <verbal phrase>, cf. 3:146, 22:45, 22:48, 29:60, 47:13 (with nominal phrase), 65:8.

For āya fī s-samāwāti wa'l-arḍi: passim.

For wa-hum 'anhā (i.e. the āyāt) mu'riḍūn, cf. 21:32, 6:4, 15:81, 36:46.

106 wa-mā yu'minu aktharuhum bi-llāhi illā wa-hum mushrikūn.

There are no exact parallels to this in the Qur'ān, but cf. the examples quoted under 12:103.

107 a-fa-aminū an ta'tiyahum ghāshiyatun min 'adhābi llāhi aw ta'tiyahumu s-sā'atu baghtatan wa-hum lā yash'urūn.

Cf. 7:95 (... baghtatan wa-hum lā yash'urūn), and 7:97 (a-fa-amina ahlu l-qurā an ta'tiyahum ba'sunā bayātan wa-hum nā'imūn). Cf. also 7:98, and 6:31, 6:44, 7:187, 22:55, 26:202, 29:53, 39:55, 43:66, 47:18, and 16:45.

108 qul hādhihi sabīlī ad'ū ilā llāhi 'alā baṣīratīn anā wa-man-i ttaba'anī wa-subḥāna llāhi wa-mā anā mina l-mushrikīn.

Cf. 3:20 (aslamtu waḡhī li-llāhi wa-man-i ttaba'anī).

109a <wa-mā arsalnā min qablīka illā riḡālan nūḥī ilayhim> min ahli l-qurā.

<=16:42>, <=21:7>, except for qablīka instead of min qablīka>.

109b a-fa-lam yasīrū fī l-arḍi fa-yanzurū kayfa kāna 'āqibatu lladhīna min qablihim⁴⁵.

The whole phrase = 40:82 and 47:10, and the same except for a-wa-lam instead of a-fa-lam = 30:9, 35:44, 40:21. Cf. also 22:46. With imperative (sīrū): 3:137, 6:11, 16:36, 27:69, 30:42, and cf. also 29:20.

109c wa-la-dāru l-ākhirati khayrun li-lladhīna ttaqaw a-fa-lā ta'qilūn.

The whole phrase: 6:32 (la-d-dāru l-ākhiratu ... yattaqūna ...), 7:169 (wa'd-dāru l-ākhiratu ... yattaqūna ...). Cf. also 16:30 (wa-la-dāru l-ākhirati khayrun wa-lāni'ma dāru l-muttaqīn).

110a ḥattā idhā stay'asa r-rusulu wa-ẓannū annahum qad kudhibū ḡā'ahum naṣrunā fa-nuḡḡiya man nashā'u⁴⁶.

No meaningful parallels.

⁴⁵ It is obvious that this phrase is not to be connected with the preceding one: the subject is here the audience of Muḥammad (or the pagans of Mecca), not the prophets (cf. also the commentaries, e.g. al-Ġalālayn on this verse).—Curiously enough, this rather obvious fact has evaded Stern, p. 198.

⁴⁶ Note that most of the occurrences of Y'S/Y'S are in Surah Joseph, and that we have here one of the few lexical links between the Story and the Epilogue.

110b wa-lā yuraddu ba'sunā 'an-i l-qawmi l-muğrimīn.

The whole phrase = 6:147 (except for ba'suhu instead of ba'sunā).

111a la-qad kāna fī qaṣaṣihim 'ibratun li-uḷī l-albābi.

Cf. 24:44 (inna fī dhālika la-'ibratun li-uḷī l-albābi), 3:13 (inna fī dhālika la-'ibratun li-uḷī l-abṣār), and 79:26 (inna fī dhālika la-'ibratun li-man yakhshā)⁴⁷.

111b mā kāna ḥadīthan yuftarā wa-lākin taṣḍīqa lladhī bayna yadayhi wa-tafṣīla kulli shay'in wa-hudan wa-raḥmatan li-qawmin yu'minūn.

Cf. 10:37 (mā kāna ḥadhā l-Qur'ānu an yuftarā min dūni llāhi wa-lākin taṣḍīqa lladhī bayna yadayhi wa-tafṣīla l-kitābi ...). Cf. also 7:52 (wa-la-qad ġi'nāhum bi-kitābin faṣṣalnāhu 'alā 'ilmin hudan wa-raḥmatan li-qawmin yu'minūn), 7:203 (... wa-hudan wa-raḥmatan li-qawmin yu'minūn).

The pair hudan wa-raḥmatan is extremely frequent (6:145, 6:157, 7:154 etc.).

Thus, more than two thirds of the Epilogue consists of formulae which are in clear contrast with the much more elaborate and artistic use of words in the Story. Several of the formulae are common with later, Medinan Surahs, which probably is due simply to the heavily formulaic character of Medinan Surahs and does not prove a later date of composition for the Epilogue.

The Prison Sermon (vv. 37b-40), though more elaborate and polished than the Epilogue (which is a little incoherent and jumps from one theme to another), shares the formulaic character of the Epilogue due to its religious content, i.e. the same monotheistic message which is repeated over and over again in the Qur'ān. The Prison Sermon is an exhortation embedded in the narration.

37b innī taraktu millata qawmin lā yu'minūna bi-llāhi wa-hum bi'l-ākhirati hum kāfirūn.

Cf. 7:45, 11:19 and 41:7 (wa-hum bi'l-ākhirati hum kāfirūn).

For qawmun lā yu'minūna bi-llāhi, cf. 10:101, 23:44, 43:88, and also 6:99, 7:52, 7:188, 7:203, 12:111(!), 16:64, 16:79, 27:86, 28:3, 29:24, 29:51, 30:37, 39:52.

Note also the existence of other formulae qawmun + <verb pl. 3. m. impf./FQH, 'LM, 'QL etc.>.

38a wa-ttaba' tu millata ābā'ī Ibrāhīma wa-Ishāqa wa-Ya'qūba mā kāna lanā an nushrika bi-llāhi min shay'in.

Cf. 4:125 (wa-ttaba' a millata Ibrāhīm), cf. also 3:95.

For the name sequence, cf. 38:45 and 4:163 (including Ismā'īl).

38b dhālika min faḍli llāhi 'alaynā wa-'alā n-nāsi wa-lākinna akthara n-nāsi lā yashkurūn.

Cf. 2:243 (inna llāha la-dhū faḍlin 'alā n-nāsi wa-lākinna akthara n-nāsi lā yashkurūn) = 10:60, and 40:61. Cf. also 27:73 (wa-inna rabbaka la-dhū faḍlin 'alā n-nāsi wa-lākinna aktharahum lā yashkurūn).

39 yā ṣāhibay-i s-siğni a-arbābun mutafarriqūna khayrun am-i llāhu l-wāḥidu l-qahhār.

No meaningful parallels in the Qur'ān.

40a mā ta'budūna min dūnihi illā asmā'an sammaytumūhā antum wa-ābā'ukum mā

⁴⁷ The word qaṣaṣ is a conscious allusion to vv. 3 and 5.

anzala llāhu bihā min sulṭānin.

Cf. 53:23 (in hiya illā asmā'an sammaytumūhā antum wa-ābā'ukum mā anzala llāhu bihā min sulṭān), and 7:71 (fī asmā'in sammaytumūhā antum wa-ābā'ukum mā nazzala llāhu bihā min sulṭān).

40b in-i l-ḥukmu illā li-llāhi amara allā ta'budū illā iyyāhu dhālika d-dīnu l-qayyimu wa-lākinna akthara n-nāsi lā ya'lamūn.

For in-i l-ḥukmu illā li-llāhi, cf. 6:57 and 12:67.

Cf. 11:2 (allā ta'budū illā llāha) = 11:26 (except an lā for allā). Cf. 17:23 (wa-qaḍā rabbuka allā ta'budū illā iyyāhu), and also 46:21.

For dhālika d-dīnu l-qayyimu wa-lākinna akthara n-nāsi lā ya'lamūn, cf. 30:30, and 9:36 (only dhālika d-dīnu l-qayyimu).

Stylistic devices

Economy of narration

The most conspicuous feature of the Qur'ānic narration is its economy⁴⁸; the text of the stories is condensed to a minimum so that without some previous knowledge of the plots, the Qur'ānic narratives could hardly be understood. The stories are not told, they are alluded to⁴⁹.

This is a feature which the Qur'ān clearly shares with pre-Islamic poetry. Both require an active role of the listener, and resemble in this respect other oral literatures: the listener knows the story beforehand and enjoys the way it is told supplementing the necessary background information in his mind. On the other hand, as the Qur'ān is divine narration its recitation differs from oral performances in that the text was not variable; Muḥammad was not in a continuous dialogue with his audience as an oral storyteller is.

To give an example of this economy, let us take in translation one verse (v. 63) with its commentary in al-Bayḍāwī (III:137-138) who inserts the necessary background information into the passage. The Qur'ānic text is in italics⁵⁰.

When they returned to their father, they said: "Father, the measure has been denied to us. He has ordered it to be denied, if we do not bring Benjamin with us. Send with us our brother, so that we can measure, i.e. we will eliminate the

⁴⁸ For a discussion of this feature with reference to Surah Joseph, cf. also e.g. Waldman, p. 5.

⁴⁹ Cf. the similar situation in Avestan narratives (I. Gershevitch, *Old Iranian Literature*, in *Handb. d. Or.* I:4:2:1, Iranistik, Literatur. Leiden – Köln 1968, p. 23): "The stories inserted in the Yašts are not usually told in full, but merely alluded to, often in so obscure a fashion that they remain incomprehensible to us unless their reappearance in the Šāh Nāma or in Pahlavi literature throws light on them. Clearly when the Yašts were composed the stories were so well known that a hint was sufficient to recall them."—Waldman (p. 6: "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* [emphasis supplied] sense of the Qur'anic telling") seems to me too polemical. For a nascent religion, it is necessary that its holy texts are received enthusiastically, not just indifferently—they have to make more than "some sense".—On the circulation of Jewish/Christian lore in the Arabian Peninsula in the early 7th century, see Stern.

⁵⁰ Cf. also e.g. v. 31 and its commentaries, and az-Zamakhsharī II:264 (on v. 59): lā budda min muqaddamatīn sabaqat lahu (i.e. Joseph) ma'ahum (i.e. the brothers).

obstacle to measuring, and we can measure as much as we need. (...) *We will protect him* from any harm."

In the Qur'ān (cf. also e.g. vv. 80-82 (in Egypt) - v. 83 (in Palestine)), the features which are not relevant to the reader/listener—who already knows the story—are dropped to heighten the main motives which the narrator wishes to emphasize⁵¹.—This is also why the Story ends with the reconciliation scene: what happened later to each character has no bearing on the main theme of the story. Later versions usually resume the later events in the life of Joseph and Jacob.

Similarly, the Qur'ānic narration leaves many of its characters anonymous. This, too, gives weight to the main characters, in this case the prophets of Allah, Joseph and Jacob, whose appearance justifies the status of the Story as a holy narrative and who are given a name⁵². Even some of the active characters are left anonymous: Zulaykhā is not given a name at all (why should she be; even she is just a piece of background equipment necessary for a prophet's progress), and even Jacob is left anonymous for some time (the name Ya'qūb is given in v. 6, but not identified with the character 'his father' until v. 68)⁵³.—Especially shadowy are the minor characters who are introduced in only one scene; we know nothing about the caravan that picks Joseph out of the well (the whole scene could well have been told in the passive: Joseph *was found* in the well, *brought* to Egypt and *sold* there), nor is the audience of Jacob (v. 94ff.) specified in any way (in theory, they can not be the brothers, who should be with the caravan).—The commentaries (e.g. az-Zamakhsharī II:274-275) and the later versions are more interested in these side motives.

Abrupt transition between episodes

Closely related to the previous feature is the lack of narrative links between episodes⁵⁴. This abrupt transition from one scene to another gives the text a dramatic quality and quickens the pace of narration outside the focus. Typical are e.g. the transition between v. 10 (brothers) and v. 11 (brothers and Jacob), and the transitions in the Prison scene (vv. 45-46, 49-50, and probably 52-53).—The commentaries do their best to destroy this effect, cf. e.g. al-Ġalālayn on vv. 45-46 (the text of the Qur'ān in italics):

⁵¹ Most of the later versions of the Story elaborate side episodes and themes, e.g. Croisier, pp. 171-174 (the stories of the *ṣāhibay-i s-siġn*), p. 191 (death of Potiphar) etc.—The economy of narration is already counteracted in the variant codices, cf. e.g. Ibn Mas'ūd (apud Jeffery, *Materials*, pp. 48-49): *wa-naza'at athwābahā* (ad v. 23); *fa-innahu abqā lahu* (ad v. 47); *min qabli an takhrūġa l-ʿiru* (ad v. 70); *min bayni yaday-i l-ʿiri* (ad v. 96). The intriguing words *dhālika kaylun yasīr* (v. 65) call for explanation, either of their function in that context or a text historical explanation.

⁵² Cf. also Premare, pp. 37-38 and Waldman, p. 6.

⁵³ In e.g. Ebied – Young, the characters are promptly introduced in the beginning (v. 12ff.), even though there is no inherent reason—other than the different artistic view point—for this, as the audience of 13th-14th century Egypt without doubt knew the story even better than the 7th century audience.

⁵⁴ A feature well known also in pre-Islamic poems, cf. e.g. the transition in the Mu'allaqa on 'Antara (Ibn al-Anbārī, *Sharḥ al-qaṣā'id as-sab' at-ṭiwāl al-ġāhiliyāt*. Dhakhā'ir al-ʿArab 35, al-Qāhira 1963) between verses 60 and 61: I: *fa-ba'athu ġariyatī fa-qultu lahā dhhabī / fa-taḥassasī akhbārāhā lī wa-ʿlamī*. (After having returned), *qālat: "..."*.

*anā unabbi'ukum bi-ta'wīlihi fa-arsilūn(i) fa-arsalūhu fa-atā Yūsufa fa-qāla: Yūsufu ...*⁵⁵

The most abrupt of these transitions is in vv. 80-83, where vv. 80-82 (in Egypt) contain the advice of "their eldest" as to what the brothers should say to their father, and v. 83 (in Palestine) continues, without any narrative link, with the answer of Jacob. Here there is definitely no reason to assume textual corruption or clumsiness of style: the repeating of the message is unnecessary, as the reader/listener already knows it, and it is not an important passage to be highlighted with repetition. Note the heavy focusing on the mainstream of action also here: everything which is of secondary value to the action and to the moral message of the Surah is condensed to a minimum.

Descriptive adjectives

Another typical feature of Surah Joseph, as well as most of the other Qur'ānic narratives⁵⁶, is the almost complete absence of descriptive adjectives. Most of the adjectives in the Qur'ān stress moral qualities. In Surah Joseph, e.g. Joseph's legendary beauty is not described by adjectives, nor is beauty listed in v. 22 which gives only the prophetic qualities of Joseph (ḥukm and 'ilm). That he was a paragon of beauty already in the time of Muḥammad, is seen in the Seduction scene, and even more in v. 31 (culminating with the exclamation mā hādhā basharan in hādhā illā malakun karīm). In Surah Joseph, the only adjectives with some kind of descriptive force⁵⁷ that are used are: karīm (v. 31 'noble' could be taken as referring to Joseph's beauty); the group of adjectives in the Pharaoh's dream and its explanation (simān, 'iḡāf, khudr, yābisāt v.43 and 46; shidād v. 48); yaṣīr (v. 65) and muzḡāt (v. 88); shaykh kabīr (v. 78); kaẓīm (v. 84, but probably a moral quality here); ḥaraḍ (v. 85).—We can see that the Pharaoh's dream has a special position in the Story, as unequivocal descriptive adjectives can be found only in it.

This dearth of descriptive adjectives seems to have a connection with the Surah's dramatic quality and its swift pace of narration—the necessary description is preferably given by the reactions of the characters; e.g. the beauty of Joseph is made manifest, not by adjectives, but by the reactions of Zulaykhā and the other women, as also is Zulaykhā's beauty by the reaction of Joseph ("wa-hamma bihā law lā an...", v. 24)—as well as the wish to concentrate on the moral qualities and implications of the story.

In this respect the Surah differs from the Biblical story, where e.g. Joseph's beauty is described in the Seduction scene (Gen. 39:7). The later versions of the story

⁵⁵ The later versions of the Story add both motivated and mechanical links using formulae typical of oral epic, e.g. Ebied – Young, v. 111; 150 (fa-hādhā ḡarā li'dh-dhi'bi min amri nuṭqihi / wa-narḡi' u li's-ṣiddīqi ...) etc. Note also the repetition in Leyenda, p. 31 = p. 38, which connects the latter passage with the earlier, between which comes an intervening episode.—In pseudo-Firdawsī, which is in many ways true to Iranian epic tradition, narrator's comments abound as transition links, cf. e.g. v. 1863 (kunūn ḡūsh bar ḥāl-i Ya'qūb dār ..), vv. 2118-2119 (zi Ya'qūb kardīm yak-čand yād ... zi Yūsuf kunūn rānd bāyad sukhan) etc.

⁵⁶ Descriptive comparisons (with ka- or mithl) are also non-existent in Surah Joseph, though they are frequent in other passages of the Qur'ān.

⁵⁷ Excluding the "moral" adjectives of Allāh used in the pious formulae.

tend to add much description; the *Leyenda* begins with a description of Joseph's beauty (p. 1-2), and its author is very enthusiastic in describing e.g. architecture⁵⁸. Especially strong is the contrast between Surah Joseph and the contemporary poetry, where description has a very prominent role: in the poems the nights are dark (‘Antara, Mu‘allaqa, v. 10) or moonlit (ash-Shanfarā, v. 2), and the camels are black (cf. ‘Antara, Mu‘allaqa, v. 12: *sūdan ka-khāfiyati l-ghurābi l-ashāmi*), whereas in Surah Joseph we do not have 'a *young/beautiful* boy' (v. 19), nor 'a *sharp* knife' (v. 31), and the pit is not dark (v. 10) nor the wolf ravenous (vv. 13, 14, 17).

The narrator's voice and dramatic dialogue

In Surah Joseph the narrator's voice gives place in the Story (vv. 4-101)⁵⁹ to dramatic dialogue. The narrator's voice is heard only a) in the relatively few links in episode boundaries⁶⁰, where it brings the action forward (parts of vv. 15, 16, 18-25, 28, 31, 35, 36, 42, 50, 58, 63, 65, 69, 70, 76, 80, 84, 96, 99, 100); b) in the pious formulae and verses pointing out the moral of the story (parts of vv. 7, 21, 22 etc.); and c) as a frame to the dialogue identifying the speaker (usually only with a form of the verb QWL) and sometimes the person spoken to (e.g. v. 4 *idh qāla Yūsufu li-abīhi*) and a vague allusion to the scene and time of the dialogue.

Instead, the action is usually brought forward by the use of dialogue. Such intensive use of dialogue was a novelty in Arabic literature; although there are some dialogue passages in pre-Islamic poems (to name the most famous, and probably the best user of dialogue, Imru'ul-Qays), they always form only a minor part of the poem.

The episodes, the paucity of narrative links between the episodes and the role of dialogue give together a strong dramatic flavour to the Story. In the Surah, the dialogue matures towards the end thus adding weight to the final episodes. In the first half, most of the dialogues consist simply of two lines (e.g. vv. 4-6 Joseph > Jacob and Jacob > Joseph), and the interaction of utterances tends to be clumsy; the characters seem each to deliver his own monologue. In contrast, in the latter half there is some dialogue that works well and where there is clear interaction between the utterances of the characters who really seem to take part in the same conversation. Compare e.g. the following dialogues:

A (v. 25b-26, 28-29)

qālat: mā ḡazā'u man arāda bi-ahlīka sū'an illā an yusḡana aw 'adhābun alīm?

qāla: hiya rāwadatnī 'an nafsī.

(...)

qāla: innahu min kaydikunna, inna kaydakunna 'azīm. Yūsufu, a'riḍ 'an hādhā wa-staghfirī li-dhanbiki innaki kunti minna l-khāḍi'īn.

⁵⁸ Note that even the verb *waṣafa* (lexically 'to describe') is used in the Surah simply as 'to tell'.—In the *Leyenda* this is translated with *fi/eguraiš* (p. 15-16 and 85), and in *al-Ġalālayn* (on v. 18 and 77) explained with *DHKR*.

⁵⁹ The Prologue and the Epilogue are instead wholly in the narrator's voice.—Dogmatically, of course, the whole Qur'ān is in the narrator's, i.e. Allah's, voice.

⁶⁰ Cf. above.

Zulaykhā said⁶¹: What does he deserve who wants to do evil to your family but imprisonment or some painful punishment?

Joseph said: She tried to seduce me.

(...)

Potiphar said: That is your cunning; you are a treacherous lot. Joseph, do not pay any attention to this, and you, ask forgiveness of your sin for you have sinned.

Here all the utterances are independent, and the dialogue has little internal coherence. It seems as if the characters were less speaking with each other than each one independently (Joseph, for example, does not say "That's not true; she tried to seduce me") and directly to the audience, even though the last utterance with its several addressees is more lively.

B (v. 70-75)

thumma adhdhana mu'adhdhinun: ayyatuhā l-ʿiru innakum la-sāriqūn!

qālū wa-aqbalū ʿalayhim: mādihā tafqīdūn?

qālū: nafqīdu šuwāʿa l-maliki wa-li-man ḡāʿa bihi ḥimlu baʿṣirin wa-anā bihi zaʿīm.

qālū: ta-llāhi la-ḡad ʿalimtum mā ḡīnā li-nufsida fi l-arḍi wa-mā kunnā sāriqīn.

qālū: fa-mā ḡazāʿuhu in kuntum kādhībīn?

qālū: ḡazāʿuhu man wuḡida fi raḥlihi fa-huwa ḡazāʿuhu. kadhālika naḡzī z-zālimīn.

Then somebody called: Ho caravan! You are thieves.

They answered, approaching them: What do you miss?

They said: The King's goblet. Whoever brings it back gets a camel load. I guarantee that.

They said: By God, you know that we did not come to Egypt to play havoc and that we are no thieves!

They said: What will be the punishment for the thief, if you lie?

They said: If you find it in somebody's bag, he shall pay for it with his own person. This is how we punish evildoers.

This is a fine piece of dialogue, perhaps the best and most lively in the Qurʾān⁶²: all lines depend heavily on the previous ones and bring the action forward (You are thieves!—What's missing?—The King's cup, and there's a reward!—We're no thieves!—And what if you are?—Then you can arrest the culprit.)⁶³.

What could be called "stage directions", are not frequent in the text (but cf. above wa-aqbalū ʿalayhim, and cf. also v. 18 and 84). Usually they have to be understood from the context, e.g. (v. 90):

Brothers: What? Are you really Joseph?

Joseph: Yes, I'm Joseph!

(enter Benjamin)

And here's Benjamin.⁶⁴

That the Story has a dramatic quality does not of course mean that it was ever

⁶¹ The translation of this and the following dialogue is free. For more literal translations, cf. the standard translations of the Qurʾān.

⁶² The eloquence of Qurʾānic dialogue can also be seen when comparing this dialogue to its counterpart in the Bible (Gen. 44:6-10) which is clearly inferior, as also e.g. Ebied – Young, v. 395ff., though here the inferiority is partly compensated by the dramatic continuation, vv. 404-408, for which cf. also az-Zamakhsharī II:268.

⁶³ Formally we could write this dialogue in the following way: A! # A=? # A=a # -A # if -(A) > ? # if -(A) > B, where "A" is a general accusation, "a" the specified accusation, and "B" the punishment.

⁶⁴ Az-Zamakhsharī (II:273-274) is one of the few who have commented on 'wa-hādhā akhī'.

acted⁶⁵. What it does mean, is that to understand Surah Joseph we must keep in mind that it is not a narrative given in third person⁶⁶ but a text based on dialogue and meant to be heard, not read.

Time, place, and identification of characters

One of the most conspicuous features in Surah Joseph is the scarcity of temporal, local and personal determinators—a feature shared with the rest of the Qur'ān—which makes the Story aoristic and universally valid. In this, the Surah resembles a fairy tale.

The few existing temporal determinators are usually vague, *idh* and *lammā* being the most common. The only exact date comes in the dream explanation⁶⁷ (7+7 years, v. 47ff.). Other temporal determinators are v. 22 *lammā balagha ashuddahu*, v. 42 *biḍ'ā sinīn* (which refers to the same as v. 45 *ba'da ummatin*). Others: *ghadan* (v. 12), *'ishā'an* (v. 16), *thumma ... min ba'd* and *ḥattā ḥīn* (v. 35), and *al-yawma* (v. 92).—Local determinators are even more scarce: *Miṣr* is mentioned twice (v. 21 and 99). Others: *al-arḍ* (often), *al-qarya* (v. 82), and *al-badw* (v. 100).—Personal determinators: *Yūsuf* (v. 4 and *passim*), *Ya'qūb* (v. 4 as "his father"; v. 6 and 38, where the name *Ya'qūb* is not identified with the character 'his father'; an explicit identification does not come until v. 68). Other characters are not named ("his brothers", "his brother", "their eldest", "the mighty"⁶⁸, "the wife of the mighty"="she in whose house he was").

This reluctance to name the characters and places seems to be intentional, at least in part. For this speaks the fact that in several cases they could not have been unknown to Muḥammad and his audience, who inevitably knew that the scene was partly in Egypt, partly in Palestine, and that "his father" was Jacob⁶⁹. Here, too, the features important to the moral of the Story are highlighted, whereas other details are left in darkness to give contrast to the picture.

Time is not only left unmentioned in the Story, it also differs from real time (and could be called fairy tale time). The clearest example of this comes in v. 84, where we are told that Jacob became blind because of his sorrow for Joseph. In fact, Joseph had already been missing for many years, but the characters outside the main stream of action are kept waiting frozen until the spotlight is next directed at them; Jacob had

⁶⁵ Another question is whether it originally was presented with changes in tone (and gestures?), a device that was used e.g. in older European literature.—Cf. Watt, Bell's Introduction, pp. 80-81.

⁶⁶ Note that later anecdotal literature tends to minimize the third person narration by another device, viz. making the main character tell the incidents in the first person. Both the use of dialogue and first person narration tend to make the story more lively.

⁶⁷ Compare the use of descriptive adjectives in this passage.—The dream passage differs from the rest of the Story also in that it is repeated (v. 43 and 46, cf. also v. 47-48) whereas in other cases repetition is avoided, all these features pointing to its importance.

⁶⁸ Not a name in the Qur'ān, where Joseph himself receives the epithet later.

⁶⁹ Also, in the beginning of the Prison Scene the two fellow prisoners are not identified and their stories are not told as they are of no consequence to the main theme of the Surah, even though their dreams and the explanations thereof leave no doubt that it was known to Muḥammad that they were the chief butler and the chief baker.—On the other hand it is improbable that some of the minor characters in the Qur'ān were known by name in 6th-7th century Mecca, cf. e.g. 2:246 (*li-nabīyin lahum*).

taken part in the action in vv. 4-18, and briefly in vv. 64-67, so that for him in vv. 83-87 little time has elapsed since the disappearance of Joseph, even though for Joseph, who has most of the time been in the centre of the action, several years have gone by. Thus, for Jacob the loss of Joseph was a recent event in vv. 83-87⁷⁰. Similarly, when time flows by without any major action (e.g. v. 22 and 42), it is telescoped and shortened in the narrative.

Ambivalence and development of characters

An interesting feature of the characters of the Surah is that all the active characters—except perhaps for Joseph⁷¹—are in some way ambivalent⁷².

The character of Jacob is obviously dual: two different roles are combined in him, viz. that of a prophet⁷³ and that of a worried father, the latter role in fact the more prominent in the Story. He worries about the—in itself improbable⁷⁴—possibility that a wolf might eat Joseph (v. 13)⁷⁵; later, he is worried about Benjamin and suspicious of the brothers (v. 66); he is spoken of as a shaykh kabīr (v. 78) who probably would break down if something happened to Benjamin; he does not believe his sons, even though this time they tell the truth (v. 83) and grows blind out of sorrow (v. 84).—The exegetes and the writers of the later versions (cf. e.g. Ebied - Young, v. 127, 149 etc.) try to play down this role and emphasize the role Jacob the Prophet. Despite this, the basic dichotomy of Jacob can not be swept away in the later versions, cf. e.g. Leyenda, where the prophethood of Jacob is emphasized and where he is made—through two messages from Joseph—to know that his son is alive, but he still is heart-broken due to the "death" of Joseph, a feature which the storyteller leaves unmotivated

⁷⁰ It could of course be argued that the loss of Benjamin (told to Jacob in vv. 81-82) triggered and renewed Jacob's sorrow for Joseph.—In many later versions (e.g. Croisier, p. 197, Leyenda, p. 35, and pseudo-Firdawsī, e.g. v. 1123) Jacob's eyesight has already been lost earlier, but the commentaries (e.g. al-Ġalālayn on v. 83) are unanimous in that Jacob become blind only later.

⁷¹ Even in his character there is some ambivalence, cf. v. 24 wa-hamma bihā law lā an ... (note also az-Zamakhsharī's comments on this verse, II:249-250); v. 33 and v. 42, but the last only if we take ansāhu sh-shayṭānu dhikra rabbihi as referring to Joseph, as many exegetes do, but which is improbable.—Cf. Waldman, p. 13: "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".

⁷² I see this moral ambivalence as one of the features that make the Surah "aḥsan al-qaṣaṣ" giving depth and a flavour of reality to the characters. In this light, I find the opinion of Mir (p. 10 "... sharp distinction between good and bad characters ...") untenable in Surah Joseph though it may be true in the Qur'ān in general.—Mir also totally overlooks the human characteristics of Jacob "the Worried Father" and sees in him simply "the Prophet", and, p. 12, fails to see the Surah as what it is, viz. a story of the growth and development of its protagonist.

⁷³ Note especially the "Prophet formula" v. 86 wa-a'lamu mina llāhi mā lā ta'lamūn (also in v. 96), which is used in the Qur'ān of the prophets and also by God of himself ("I know things which you do not know", e.g. 2:30).

⁷⁴ Though cf. Abū Nuwās, Dīwān (ed. Wagner, Bibliotheca Islamica 20a, 1958) I:174 (on the fear of wolves attacking old men).

⁷⁵ The exegetes naturally take this as a mere pretext, and claim that in fact Jacob was afraid of the brothers as he knew their rancour towards Joseph.—Note that verses like v. 18 do not show Jacob as a prophet: the phrase bal sawwalat lakum anfusukum shay'an fits as well Jacob the Father (who refuses to believe bad news) as Jacob the Prophet (who knows that the brothers lie to him).

and unexplained. Similarly, the *ʿiṣma* of Joseph is emphasized in later versions, cf. below⁷⁶.

The brothers are of course first shown as jealous and scheming⁷⁷ (v. 5, 8-18), but even here a better aspect is hinted at: *wa-takūnū min baʿdihi qawman ṣāliḥīn* (v. 9).—This phrase is later justified in the Story, as afterwards the brothers do indeed behave as decent men⁷⁸. They obey their father (v. 68); are indignant when accused of theft (v. 70-75); try to save Benjamin, though he is another favorite of Jacob and though they must think that he is indeed guilty (v. 78); admit their fault, first among themselves (v. 80) and later publicly (v. 91 and 97).—Thus it is not surprising that the Story ends with a reconciliation (v. 92, 98, and especially, 100-101)⁷⁹ and that several exegetes accepted also the brothers to have been prophets⁸⁰.—In pseudo-Firdawsī, where the earlier life of Jacob is given as a prologue, the rehabilitation of the brothers is all the more understandable as they in fact have not done much more than their father Jacob who cheated his brother (v. 369ff.) and later evidently became one of *qawm ṣāliḥīn!*

In the later versions, there is a clear tendency to separate the good and the bad sides of the brothers and to create one good brother (usually identified as *Yahūdḥā*) against nine evil brothers. The commentaries are instead less inclined to do this, cf. e.g.:

al-Ġalālayn on v. 10: *qā'iluhum* = *Yahūdḥā*, but
on v. 80: *Yahūdḥā* or *Rübīl*.

Ibn Kathīr I:320: According to some the brothers, too, are prophets (though not approved by Ibn Kathīr).
I:323: three options given for *qā'iluhum*.

al-Bayḏāwī III:127: *wa-ʿalā āli Yaʿqūb* means the other brothers whose prophethood is seen as they are symbolized by shining stars in the dream.

III:128: *qā'iluhum* = *Yahūdḥā* or *Rübīl*.

III:140: *kabīruhum* = *Yahūdḥā* or *Shimʿūn*.

III:143: on the prophethood of the brothers.

az-Zamakhsharī II:243: the brothers, too, are prophets.

II:244: *qā'iluhum* = *Yahūdḥā*, who is also "their eldest".

II:264: *Shimʿūn* is "*aḥsanuhum raʿyan fi Yūsuf*" (!).

II:264: the brothers are pious.

II:269-270: three options for *kabīruhum*.

⁷⁶ Jacob's special affection and preference for Joseph, too, shows the same dichotomy. Two aspects merge together, viz. a) a Prophet recognizing another Prophet; and b) an ageing father loving his young child more than the older, presumably grown-up, brothers.

⁷⁷ Note that e.g. in Leyenda (p. 3) the brothers are said to have loved Joseph before his dreams—a parallel with Muhammad, who traditionally is said to have been respected by his fellow Meccans before his mission.—In pseudo-Firdawsī (vv. 1173-1178), instead, the brothers hate Joseph even before his dreams and plan to kill him.

⁷⁸ That they "seduce" Benjamin (v. 61, 65) is not a proof of their evil character (contra Premare, pp. 135-137), as they have no afterthoughts about him. Jacob is here simply an overworrying father.

⁷⁹ Note that the other prophet stories in the Qurʾān are Punishment stories (see e.g. Watt, Bell's Introduction to the Qurʾān, p. 127ff.). Surah Joseph stands alone also in this respect as it does not fit to this paradigm: there is no (at least explicitly mentioned) unbelieving opposition. Rather, what Joseph meets is domestic problems first in Palestine, and later in Egypt, and the story ends in a harmonious accord (v. 101).

⁸⁰ Discussed e.g. by Ibn Kathīr I:320.—Cf. also Croisier, p. 207: "Ils [c.-à.-d. les frères] étaient les hommes généreux et bons de leur génération".

II:275: after a penitence of twenty years the brothers become prophets (but wa-qad ukhtulifa fī stinbā'ihim).⁸¹

Zulaykhā is in this respect perhaps the most interesting figure: it is she who, with her attempted seduction and her lies, caused the troubles of Joseph in Egypt (vv. 23-25). Yet in spite of this she, too, has a better side⁸²: she seems to be satisfied when the truth is revealed (v. 51: al-āna ḥaṣḥaṣa l-ḥaqq).—The subsequent verses (52-53) are probably to be attributed to Joseph rather than to Zulaykhā⁸³.

Potiphar himself is a secondary character who is active only in vv. 21, 25, and 28-29, after which he simply disappears from the narrative⁸⁴. Thus it would be hasty to deduce anything from his passivity—in real life he of course should have done something when Joseph was sent to prison as his innocence had been proven. In later versions, the imprisonment is explained (e.g. *Leyenda*, p. 50). In pseudo-Firdawsī, Potiphar's goodness is emphasized and he even acts as a father figure for Joseph (e.g. v. 2864 and 2890).

Development of characters is an unusual feature in later Arabic prose narratives (e.g. anecdotes). Surah Joseph is, on the contrary, a story of the development of its protagonist⁸⁵ and his growth to prophethood: in the beginning Joseph is a child who himself does not understand the meaning of his dream (v. 4)⁸⁶—later, interpretation

⁸¹ In the Qur'ān, the problem of the moral character of the brothers is solved in the end of the story (v. 100) where Satan is made responsible for what had happened and the brothers are thus absolved from guilt which was already alluded to in v. 5.

⁸² Developed to a maximum in the Persian romantic epic *Yūsuf va-Zulaykhā* by Ġāmī, where Zulaykhā is seen as a metaphor of mystical love.—For an epitome of Ġāmī's epic, see e.g. Pagliaro – Bausani, *La letteratura persiana*, pp. 479-484.

⁸³ These words have erroneously been attributed to Jacob in Ebied – Young, vv. 361-362, but this seems to be a simple mistake by the scribe for Yūsuf, which curiously enough has not occurred to the editors (see their note, pp. 5-6). That this is the case, is made probable—besides by the logic of the story—by a similar mistake in v. 443: here the editors' emendation (fa-qāla li-nabīyi llāhi Ya'qūb), even though approved by Beeston, p. 292 (who changes qāla to qāl in order to keep the metre), is far less probable than an emendation fa-qāla nabīyu llāhi *Yūsuf*. The names have also been confused in *Leyenda*, p. 8.—That the editors (Ebied and Young) have not been conversant with the Joseph legend, is also shown by their misplacing the episode of vv. 363-393, which belongs in the lacuna after v. 167, as is shown by parallel tradition (e.g. Croisier, pp. 137-141, but also already in pseudo-Firdawsī, p. 235ff., and Poema de Yūçuf, strophe 44-57). The editors have not recognized the episode though the name Mālik is mentioned in it.—In *Leyenda* the words wa-dhālika li-ya'lama annī lam akhunhu (akello eš porke šabe ke yo no hago falšia en lo abšente, ke Allāh, ta'ālā, no gia laš arteš de loš menoškabadoš) occur twice, once as words of Zulaykhā, once of Joseph (p. 60). The editor has taken the first occurrence as a mistake (see her note), but more probably this is not the case, as it is fairly usual to find a passage which has two possible interpretations, interpreted in both ways in the later versions.

⁸⁴ Though not from the commentaries. Note that just as the time is frozen when the characters are not acting, characters not needed any more in the story are simply swept aside and forgotten. Thus, it is not meaningful to ask what Potiphar thought of Joseph's imprisonment; there simply is no Potiphar any more.

⁸⁵ It could even be said that what Joseph learns in the Surah—besides becoming a prophet—is the noble art of lying, though in a good cause. Meanwhile the brothers turn from lies to truth.

⁸⁶ I find little support for Mir's view (p. 12 and note 19) that already in the beginning Joseph mastered interpretation of dreams; the repetition of ra'aytu, adduced by Mir as evidence for this, is clearly a stylistic feature, not hesitation on the part of Joseph, and the pronoun -hum in ra'aytuhum fī sāgīdīn does not imply that Joseph knew that his dream referred to human beings, his brothers. First of all, if it is taken as

of dreams⁸⁷ is the field in which he proves his superiority. Still a child, he has a passive role until v. 21. V. 22 tells of his growth to a man, or a youth, but we subsequently learn that he is still weak: in the Seduction scene as well as in the Gossip scene, only divine intervention saves him morally⁸⁸, and in the first the testimony of somebody (v. 26 *shahida shāhid*) is needed to keep him out of prison; Joseph has not yet learned to scheme (*kayd*) and to manipulate the action—he is still the passive victim in the Story.

In the prison Joseph's moral and prophetic qualities mature, and from episode J (cf. below) onwards his destiny begins to be in his own hands—and in those of God (see especially v. 56 and 76). He takes the initiative in the matter of *Zulaykhā* and *niswat al-madīna* (vv. 50-51), takes care of the Egyptians (implied in v. 55), and gains the upper hand in the matter of his brothers, who become passive marionettes played with by Joseph, in a series of tricks (vv. 59+62, 69-75+79), and reaches the final triumph in vv. 89-92, with the impressive public acknowledgement of his superiority by his parents and brothers in vv. 99-100.

Later tradition has tried to understate the consequence of this development (that Joseph the Youth is not a prophet with a full *ʿiṣma*)⁸⁹.—Thus, the word *ẓanna* (v. 42) has been explained with *ayqana* in the commentaries⁹⁰, as was also done in the dogmatically difficult verse 110⁹¹. The same tendency has already been noted in the figure of Jacob.

The later versions play down the moral ambivalence of most of the characters and at the same time change an entertaining story to a hagiographic legend. Jacob and an indication of the knowledge of the dream's meaning, it is more likely that it is a case of the narrator's voice being audible in the text (*we* as well as the narrator, already know in the beginning that the stars were the brothers etc.); cf. v. 18 *wa-law kunnā ẓādiqīn* which sounds strange in the mouth of the brothers. Still, this does not, at least not necessarily, seem to be the case, as pl. 3. m/f etc. pronouns and verbs are often used in the Qur'ān for inanimate/non-human subjects: in Surah Joseph we have in v. 48 *ya'kulna* of years of famine (and cf. above v. 46 *baqarāt ... ya'kuluhunna ...*). In other Surahs we have e.g. *fa-sawwāhunna sab'ā samāwāt* (2:29, astronomical object); *bi-kalimātin fa-atammahunna* (2:124); *ashhurun ... fihinna* (2:197); *āyātun ... hunna* (3:7) etc. The commentaries to 12:4 explain the form by referring to the intellectual character of the action of SĠD, cf. e.g. al-Farrā' II:35, al-ʿUkbarī, p. 722, az-Zamakhsharī II:242, and al-Ġalālayn on v. 4.—Note also Maġālis Tha'lab (ed. ʿA. M. Hārūn, Dār al-Maʿārif s.a.) I:265 (on 2:31).—Mir also overlooks the *explicit* statements of the Qur'ān that Joseph was taught the knowledge of interpretation of dreams, and that his status changes in the middle of the story: *yaġtabika rabbuka ... wa-yuʿallimuka* (v. 6; future), *wa-kadhālika makkannā li-Yūsufa fī l-arḍi wa-li-nuʿallimahu min taʿwīli l-aḥādīth* (v. 21), *wa-lammā balagha ashuddahu ātaynāhu ḥukman wa-ʿilman* (v. 22, i.e. not earlier!).—The dogma of prophetic *ʿiṣma* has worked its way into many later versions, thus e.g. Ebied – Young, v. 27, Joseph himself knows the importance of his dream (*lahā naba' lā budd*). Contrary to this, Joseph's learning has been concretized in Croisier, p. 170.

⁸⁷ Stern, p. 199 and note 40, argues for translating *taʿwīl al-aḥādīth* as 'interpretation of tales' but not convincingly, as all that Joseph explains in the Story is dreams.—The importance of dreams for the story is elaborated in later versions, which often add other significant dreams, e.g. Ebied – Young, vv. 74-79 and Croisier, p.112.

⁸⁸ For a discussion of Joseph's *hamm*, see az-Zamakhsharī II:249.

⁸⁹ Similar tendencies are visible in the development of the figure of Muḥammad.—For Joseph, see az-Zamakhsharī's comments on the Seduction scene, II:248ff. See also Stern, p. 196.

⁹⁰ See e.g. al-Ġalālayn on v. 42. Cf. also az-Zamakhsharī II:257 and al-Bayḍāwī III:134.

⁹¹ See e.g. al-Ġalālayn on v. 110. Cf. also az-Zamakhsharī II:278 and al-Bayḍāwī III:144-145.

Joseph become Prophets with an *‘išma*⁹²; the brothers are condensed to one good vs. nine bad brothers⁹³; Potiphar becomes in some stories nearly a father figure to Joseph, and Zulaykhā a romantic heroine (cf. above).

The structure of Surah Joseph

The structure of Surah Joseph has lately received some attention⁹⁴. As the Surah consists of episodes with clear episode boundaries between them, they are to be taken as the basic elements of which the Surah consists. The episodes of the *Story* are:

- A. The Dream (4-6)
(narrator's comment, 7)
- B. The Plan (8-10)
- C. The First Plot (11-14)
(narrator's résumé 15; episode link)
- D. The Lie (16-18)⁹⁵
- E. The Caravan (19-21)
(narrator's résumé 22)
- F. The Seduction (23-29)⁹⁶
- G. The Gossip (30-33)⁹⁷
(narrator's comment 34)
- H. The Prison (35-42 containing the pivotal Prison Sermon 37b-40)
- I. Pharaoh's Dream (43-49)⁹⁸
- J. Joseph's Innocence Proven (50-55)
(narrator's comment)

⁹² Cf. e.g. pseudo-Firdawsī's explanation of the reaction of Jacob when the brothers lie about the fate of Joseph (v. 2054): *ba-dil guft k-in qiṣṣa āmad padīd * nabāyad kunūn pardahāshān darīd.*

⁹³ Cf. above. Pseudo-Firdawsī (v. 1613) calls the nine brothers unequivocally 'bad': *ki būdand ān nuh barādar(a)sh bad.* In pseudo-Firdawsī, the distinction of good vs. evil (light vs. darkness) is emphasized, which probably is to be connected with the Iranian background of the light symbolism.

⁹⁴ A. Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren. Studien zur Sprache, Geschichte und Kultur des islamischen Orients. Neue Folge Band 10*, 1981, especially p. 297, and *Zur Struktur; Mir; Rendsburg*. Rendsburg overestimates the value of Mir's study which in fact contributes little to Joseph studies.—Mir's article also suffers from his misunderstanding of linguistic phenomena; e.g. p. 3 note 5 is a misunderstanding of the common Qur'ānic device of preposing the object in order to keep the rhyme intact (and not sarcasm or irony); p. 12 *aḥada ‘ashara kawkaban* comes before *ash-shamsa wa'l-qamara* for rhythmic reasons etc.

⁹⁵ This episode is intermediate. The main action (around Joseph) continues with episode E.

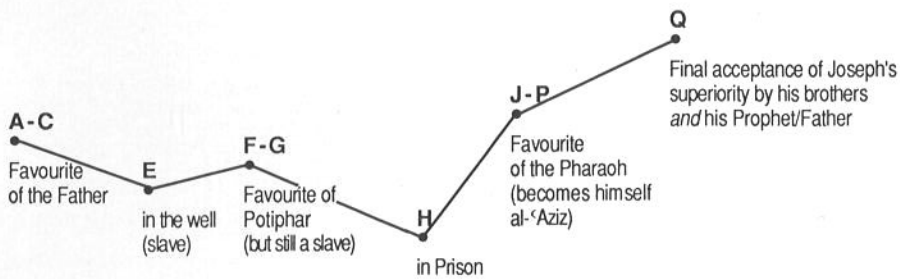
⁹⁶ The Seduction scene is dramatic and it has drawn the attention of later narrators of the story, both in Persian (pseudo-Firdawsī, p. 314ff.; Rashīd-ad-dīn (K. Jahn (ed.), *Die Geschichte der Kinder Israels*. Wien 1973), fol. 279r l. 20ff. etc.), and in Arabic tradition (Croisier, p. 153ff.). Is it by chance that in many versions the Seduction scene falls in a lacuna (Poema de Yūsuf, Ebied – Young), or do we have here a conscious attack on the erotic part of the story?

⁹⁷ M. Mir's understanding of this passage (based on A.A. Iṣlāḥī's view) is totally unacceptable and untenable (cf. Mir, pp. 1-2 note 3; p. 3; p. 4 note 6; pp. 13-14). There is nothing in the Surah to support the hypothesis that the ladies threatened to commit suicide (Mir's comments on *kayd*, p. 2 note 3, are overreading the text), and even the claim that they attempted to seduce Joseph is based on insufficient grounds, as v. 51 (*mā khaṭbukunna idh rāwadtunna Yūsufa ‘an nafsihi*) can well be taken as a generalization like v. 28, both referring to Zulaykhā cum womankind in general. Cf. also *az-Zamakhsharī II:255* (the ladies advise Joseph to obey his mistress).—Cf. also the misogynic generalization of Ebied – Young, v. 170. Rashīd-ad-dīn brings maid servants into action (fol. 279v, l. 2) testifying for Zulaykhā. That the guilt of Zulaykhā was generalized by Potiphar is stated explicitly in pseudo-Firdawsī, v. 3695: *ba-dhanb-i Zulaykhā zabān-i ‘Azīz * zanān-i ḡahān rā sukhan guft nīz.*

⁹⁸ Outside the main stream of action.

- K. The First Encounter with the Brothers (58-62)
- L. The Second Plot (63-67)
(narrator's comment 68)
- M. The Second Encounter with the Brothers (69-80)
- N. The Truth (81-87)
- O. The Third Encounter with the Brothers (88-93 containing the anagnorisis⁹⁹)
- P. The Father (94-98)
- Q. The Dream Comes True (99-101)¹⁰⁰

Considerable time elapses between episodes E/F (fa-lammā balagha ashuddahu v. 22), H and I/J (biḍ'ā sinīn v. 42), and J/K (at least the seven fat years and part of the seven meagre years).—In terms of Joseph's success (and his ascendance to power¹⁰¹), the episodes can be visualized as follows:



Here the Prison episode which is the lowest point in the career of Joseph marks the turning point of the Story. It is around this episode that the whole story seems to have been composed¹⁰². It is both thematically and structurally the central point.—Thematically, it has of course enormous weight, as it propagates the same message as the whole of the Qur'ān, viz. monotheism (the Prison Sermon, vv. 37b-40). The weight of this sermon is also seen in that here the person of Muḥammad shines through in the story of Joseph (see Appendix). It is also the only scene in which Joseph acts as a

⁹⁹ I can not quite understand what Mir means with (p. 13) "He [i.e. Joseph] seems far more clever than his brothers. The elder, and much more seasoned, brothers fail to identify him when they first see him in Egypt, but he has no difficulty in recognizing them"; is it not obvious that the brothers who were already grown up when Joseph last saw them and who presumably appeared now before him without trying to conceal their identity from him (why should they?), were easier to recognize than Joseph who had taken a new identity (that of the Egyptian 'Azīz) and who had been a child when they had last seen him and who deliberately hides his identity?—Note that in Leyenda, pp. 67-68, Joseph does not later recognize Zulaykhā when her appearance has changed. See also e.g. Ibn Kathīr, p. 346; al-Bayḍāwī III:137; and az-Zamaksharī II:264.

¹⁰⁰ The theologically difficult points of vv. 99-100 have been nicely explained away e.g. in Leyenda, p. 96.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Stern, p. 200ff.

¹⁰² The pivotal role of the Prison Sermon has been overlooked in most studies of Surah Joseph but it has been recognized in passing by Neuwirth, p. 139 ("Höhepunkt der Erzählung") and p. 141.—It is interesting to note that many later versions omit this sermon (e.g. Ebied – Young and Croisier, though the latter replaces it by a lengthy prayer, pp. 177-179), probably as they are more interested in entertaining than edifying. Leyenda gives the sermon only as a Qur'ānic citation without elaborating it (p. 54), but it adds similar material elsewhere (e.g. pp. 16-17: prayer taught to Joseph while he is in the well; note that the beginning of this passage closely resembles the legend of the prophetic call of Muḥammad: "i diššole [Ġibrīl]: yā Yūsuf, ḷdi! diššo: i ḷke dire? diššo: di...").

prophet and not a mere, though divinely inspired, interpreter of dreams. This scene is the *raison d'être* of the whole Surah, without which it would merely be one of *asā'ir al-awwālīn*.

It is also structurally the central point in the narrative, on both sides of which the episodes are to some extent¹⁰³ symmetrically constructed. Basic for the overall structure of the Story is the triangle of episodes A-H-Q, where A and Q parallel each other. B finds a parallel partly in K and M (the *kayd* of the brothers vs. the *kayd* of Joseph/God); C is paralleled by L; D is paralleled by N (antithesis; first the brothers lie, but they are believed—Jacob's attitude is not outright refusal to believe—later they tell the truth but are not believed: poetic justice!); E, though not exactly paralleled by any element after H, does find some parallelism in the role of caravans (*sayyāra*—*ʿīr* in episodes E and M, N, O); F and G in which Joseph is accused and blamed are paralleled by J.

The episodes A to H describe the downward movement in the life of Joseph (his trials, *ʿusr*), I to Q his gradual ascendance (his *yusr*) towards the final episode which also is the justification of A, the starting point of the action.—In the first half, Joseph is more or less passive (he does nothing against his brothers, and only tries to run away from Zulaykhā and can do nothing to prove his innocence), in the latter he is active and manipulates the action. Similarly, in the first half it is the guile (*kayd*) of the brothers and Zulaykhā that dominates, in the latter the guile of Joseph/God grows stronger and finally ensnares the others, just as Moses' stick had swallowed the sticks of the Egyptian magicians (Qur. 7:103ff.); the initial success of Lie is seen in the end to have been illusory.

It is evident that the story is *u t i l i z e d* to preach monotheism—hence the central role of the Prison Sermon in episode H. On the other hand, the Story itself, taken out of its context in the Qur'ān and Muḥammad's career, is about Joseph's ascent to prophecy and power, as is half a dozen times stated in the text (vv. 6, 21, 22, 56, (91), 101).

The Best of Stories

The Surah itself claims to be a good story (*aḥsan al-qaṣaṣ*, v. 3). As the Qur'ān is dogmatically *kalimat Allāh*, God's speech to mankind, this claim could not be counterargued in Mediaeval times¹⁰⁴. Yet it was possible to explain the reasons for the superiority of the Surah. The simplest explanation is given by pseudo-Firdawsī (vv. 121-122 and 127): it is beautiful simply because it is God's speech!

¹⁰³ But not rigorously.—Mir, especially p. 2, and Rendsburg (as also Monroe in his analysis of *al-maqāma al-maḍīrīya*, and Abu Deeb in his analysis of pre-Islamic poems) insist on a strict ring composition. The principle of rigid ring composition seems often—at least in Near Eastern literatures—to lead to forcing narratives and poems into a premeditated scheme without paying enough attention to the text itself; in practice, few texts show a rigid ring composition.—For circular composition, see also Waldman, p. 9, and *ibid.* p. 6: note that the Surah is a self-contained whole with a starting point (the events before which are not needed to appreciate it) and a closing point (the events after which are not needed).

¹⁰⁴ Except of course by rejecting the whole Surah, as some of the Khāriḡites did.

More serious attempts to understand the Surah's beauty were made by the commentators. Most of them emphasize the moral message of the Surah¹⁰⁵ and also the truth of the story¹⁰⁶. Both aspects are already alluded to in the Qur'ān itself (v. 111). The aesthetic side of this superiority received less attention. It was mentioned often in passing in the commentaries (e.g. al-Bayḍāwī III:126: it was told in *abda' al-asālib*). These three aspects were given concisely by Ibn 'Arabī who writes (p. 587): *aḥsan al-qaṣaṣ li-kawni lafẓihi wa-tarkībihi i'ḡāzan <aesthetic aspect> wa-zāhir ma'nāhu muḡābiqan li'l-wāqi' <truth> wa-bāḡinihi dāllan 'alā ṣūrat as-sulūk <moral, and in this case, mystical aspect>*.

For a modern scholar, the moral message of the story does not give a sufficient answer as to why Surah Joseph is *aḥsan al-qaṣaṣ*¹⁰⁷ even though it may give a sufficient answer as to why the Surah was composed. We have to remember that the reason for the composition of this Surah, as well as the whole Qur'ān, is not to entertain but to edify—even though this was most efficiently achieved when the text entertained the audience to be edified.

I believe that the above analysis has given adequate grounds for accepting the Surah's claim of high aesthetic and entertaining value. This is also demonstrated by the story's enormous popularity throughout the Islamic world. Of its popularity we have ample evidence: the high number of later versions, both (semi)-popular and educated, as well as explicit mentions of its fame in Mediaeval sources¹⁰⁸.

The analysis has emphasized the main features which, I believe, are the basis of the Story's artistic value. These include:

1. The symmetrical structure of the Story which makes it balanced and smoothly flowing.

2. Coherence of the Story created by the skillful use of lexical links throughout the Story.

3. Compactness of narration; the quick, almost breathless tempo of the Story which keeps the reader/listener interested and prevents him from growing weary, and the highlighted passages (e.g. the Prison Sermon) in a slower tempo which draws the attention of the reader/listener to the message of the Story.

4. The universal validity of the Story created by its independence of any specific time or place.

5. Realistically drawn and psychologically rounded characters whose action is well motivated: instead of hagiographic stereotypes, the Surah presents us credible, life-size

¹⁰⁵ Cf. al-Bayḍāwī III:126; az-Zamakhsharī II:240; Ibn Kathīr I:317; al-Ghazālī, *Baḥr al-maḡabba*, p. 3.—Ibn 'Arabī, p. 590, argues that one of the main points of the Story is to show that God's will is irresistible.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. also pseudo-Firdawsī, v. 291ff.—Note the hostile attitude of the Qur'ān towards fictional stories seen e.g. in the use of verb *iftarā*, and in the term *asāfir al-awwalīn*.

¹⁰⁷ What the Qur'ān itself exactly means with *aḥsan al-qaṣaṣ* is of course open to discussion, but I have taken it in the broadest sense ("a good/very good story").

¹⁰⁸ E.g. pseudo-Firdawsī, vv. 1130-1131, and the anonymous *Muḡmal at-tavārikh* (ed. Malik-ash-Shu'arā' Bahār. 2nd ed. s.a. s.l.), p. 195 which says: *Yūsuf ... qiṣṣa-yi u sakht mashhūr-ast va-nīkūtār ... "his story is very famous and beautiful"*.

figures.

6. Lively use of dramatically efficient dialogue which brings the action forward (a novelty in Arabic literature which must have struck the contemporary audience even more strongly than us) and which brings the characters nearer to the reader/listener than a third person narrative would have done.

All these features operate together to produce a swiftly moving, impressively dramatic narrative which catches the imagination of its audience and brings home the religious message¹⁰⁹.

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¹⁰⁹ Wansbrough writes in his *Quranic studies* (Oxford 1977), p. 19: "... the so-called narrative sections of the Qurʿān are of essentially symbolic character adduced to illustrate the eschatological value of the theodicy ...". Though this may be true in most of the Punishment stories, the above analysis has, I hope, made it clear that Surah Joseph is more than a frame for a moral or eschatological message. That it contains a religious message must not be overlooked, but to read it merely as a religious lesson, is a gross underestimation of its elaborate composition.

¹¹⁰ Other works used in this article are quoted in the footnotes.—I have not been able to use D. Künstlinger, *Die Sūratu Yūsufa*, Hagedem I, 1907, pp. 151-170, mentioned in S. Róbert, *A Korán világa*. Helikon kiadó s.a. [1988?].

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Ibn 'Arabī, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-kaḥīm* I-II. Bayrūt s.a.

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az-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf* I-IV. Bayrūt s.a.

Appendix: Joseph = Muḥammad

Lately there have been several studies on the self-identification of Muḥammad with earlier prophets, and its influence on the traditional biography of Muḥammad¹¹². Premare (p. 168-169) shows that there is some parallelism—though not so profound as he thinks—between Surah Joseph and the sīra of the Prophet, and takes this as evidence for a later manipulation of the Surah to make it conform with the life of the Prophet. I find his theory hard to accept. We know that the sīra in its present form had been stabilized more than a century after the death of the Arabian Prophet, and that the consonantal text of the Qur'ān had been stabilized soon after his death¹¹³ if not at least

¹¹¹ The author has also written an unpublished dissertation 'Studies in Qur'ānic narratives: a structural analysis of Sūrat Yūsuf and al-Naml' but as his short article fails to meet scholarly standards, I have not found it necessary to procure a copy of the dissertation.

¹¹² E.g. K. Prenner, *Muhammad und Musa*. Altenberge 1986.

partly during his lifetime¹¹⁴. The parallels adduced by Premare prove, if anything, that the *sīra* was remodelled after the *sūra*, not vice versa.

On the other hand, it is clear that the life and the circumstances of the Prophet must have affected the way Muḥammad saw the earlier prophets, his predecessors. Thus it is understandable that there is some resemblance between Muḥammad's life and the Qur'ānic stories of the earlier prophets, especially the so-called Punishment stories, most of which belong to the end of the Meccan period. In Surah Joseph, the situation of Muḥammad shows through in the culmination point of the Story, the Prison Sermon (vv. 37b-40)¹¹⁵. At its clearest this is found in vv. 36b-37a which read: *innī taraktu millata qawmin lā yu'minūna bi-llāhi wa-hum bi'l-ākhirati hum kāfirūn # wa-ttaba' tu millata ābāi Ibrāhīma wa-Ishāqa wa-Ya'qūba*—a phrase which does not so much fit Joseph (whose father was a prophet¹¹⁶) as Muḥammad (whose father was not).—In later versions, the identification has gone further, cf. e.g. Croisier, p. 193 (the Arabic text quoted on p. 50) where we have the *shahāda* with Joseph instead of Muḥammad as God's prophet.

On the identification of Joseph with Muḥammad, see also Stern, especially p. 204, who argues for the importance of Joseph as a model for Muḥammad. He seems to overestimate this importance: the Qur'ān mentions Joseph only once outside Surah Joseph, whereas Moses, Abraham and the other prophets are frequently referred to in the Qur'ān. More probable is that the length and unique coherence of Surah Joseph has caused the unconscious identification of Muḥammad with the protagonist in more detail than in the shorter prophet passages.—In the ḥadīths we have some conscious identification of Muḥammad with Joseph, though far less than with some other prophets. Cf. e.g. az-Zamakhsharī II:274 who quotes the ḥadīth that on the day of the Faṭh Makka the Prophet is reported having said: "aqūlu mā qāla akhī Yūsuf: lā tathrība 'alaykum al-yawma", and the comparison of the calamities that fell on the Meccans during the boycott of Banī Hāshim with "sinī Yūsuf"¹¹⁷.

¹¹³ Contra Wansbrough and P. Crone – M. Cook, *Hagarism*. Cambridge 1977.

¹¹⁴ Cf. J. Burton, *The collection of the Qur'ān*. Cambridge 1977.

¹¹⁵ This is of course most likely to happen in passages where the Surah differs from its Jewish Vorläge (the Joseph cycle).

¹¹⁶ According to some commentaries (e.g. az-Zamakhsharī II:256) *millata qawmin* refers to the Egyptians, but this is clearly a later attempt to explain a difficult phrase without admitting the mixing of Joseph and Muḥammad in the Surah.

¹¹⁷ See Premare, pp. 104-105.