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THE QUR'ANIC STORY OF JOSEPH: PLOT, THEMES, AND CHARACTERS

For its sheer readability, the Qur'anic story of Joseph, told in S. 12, is perhaps unsurpassed in the whole of the Qur'ān. The less than one hundred verses of the narrative¹ telescope many years, present an amazing variety of scenes and characters in a tightly-knit plot, and offer a dramatic illustration of some of the fundamental themes of the Qur'ān. The present article, as the title indicates, is a study of selected aspects of the sura. The study is mainly literary in character. As such it will not deal with that part of the sura (the concluding part, chiefly) in which the Qur'ān seeks to apply the story to the Meccan situation of Muḥammad's time.² I have thus limited the scope of this inquiry in order to bring into relief, with reference to S. 12, a sorely neglected aspect of the Qur'ān, namely, the literary aspect. It is not necessary to reproduce the story in detail or in outline; any of the well-known translations of the Qur'ān can be used for purposes of reference. The translation of the Qur'anic verses cited is my own.

I. PLOT

Tensions and Their Resolution

A notable feature of the story is the way in which the plot thickens and is then brought to its resolution. Major tensions are created in roughly the first half of the story and may be catalogued as follows:

- a. Joseph's dream (4–6).
- b. The brothers' plot against Joseph (8–18).
- c. Potiphar's wife's attempt to seduce Joseph (23–29).
- d. A similar attempt by Egyptian ladies (30–31).³
- e. Joseph's imprisonment (35).
- f. The king's dream (43–44).

After that the plot begins to unravel, but the tensions are resolved in reverse order. The king's dream is the first to be interpreted (45–49), followed by

¹ The story proper (with which we are here concerned) begins with vs. 4 and ends with vs. 101.

² Neither will I discuss some of the important, but from the viewpoint of the story peripheral, moral-theological issues the sura raises, for example the issue of a prophet's "sinlessness" (raised in connection with vss. 24, 53), or that of Joseph's "trick" to detain Benjamin in Egypt (vss. 70–76).

For a recent study of the Joseph story "in the context of Muhammad's prophetic mission" (Joseph as a "relevant and significant model for Muhammad"), see M.S. Stern, "Muhammad and Joseph: A Study of Koranic Narrative," *JNES*, XLIV (1985), 193–204.

³ The generally held view about the banquet scene is that the ladies, overwhelmed by Joseph's beauty, inadvertently cut their hands with the knives they are holding. In his Qur'ān commentary

Joseph's release from prison (50; see below). Next come the confessions of the Egyptian ladies, followed by that of Potiphar's wife (51). The brothers learn their lesson (58ff.), and finally comes the fulfillment of Joseph's dream (100). Thus we have a lot that is neatly structured on the analogy of the literary-rhetorical device of *al-laff wa 'l-nashr 'alā 'l-'aks* ("involution and evolution in reverse").

Two critical questions must be faced with regard to this suggested structure. First, what about the dreams of Joseph's two prison-mates (36–42), which have not been accounted for? The episode may be taken as an exception to the scheme suggested above. On the other hand it may be regarded either as an appendix to e. or as a prelude to f. For, from the point of view of the plot, it is like the caravan episode (19–20) and, in spite of the role it plays in advancing the plot, it is, like that episode, of incidental importance in itself. The second question concerns the moment of Joseph's release: he is set free only after the confessions of the ladies and Potiphar's wife, so how can his release be said to precede d. and c.? I would argue that while Joseph actually comes out of prison *after* the confessions, the king orders his release *before* the confessions, and if Joseph

Tadabbur-i Qur'ān, 8 vols. (Lahore, 1967–1980), III, 454–56, Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī has shown that this is not the case and I accept his view. According to Iṣlāḥī, the ladies' criticism of Potiphar's wife (30) contains the implicit boast that they themselves would fare much better with Joseph. Potiphar's wife challenges them to prove it. The ladies' scheme is to bring Joseph round by using one of the most potent of feminine weapons—threat of suicide—if he remains adamant. When Joseph appears before them at the banquet (31), they are awestruck at his beauty (*akbarnahū*), but, pulling themselves together, try their charms on him, failing which some of them cut their hands as a token of their seriousness in carrying out the threat of suicide (*wa qaṭṭāna aydiyahunna*), finally acknowledging defeat but not without pleading that their charms did not work with Joseph because he is an angel and not a human being (*mā hādḥā basharan in hādḥā illa malakun karīmun*). (On the last point, see also Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Al-Taṣīr al-Kabīr*, 32 vols. [Cairo, 1934–1962?], XVIII, 128.) All the unsavory details of the episode are thus disposed of in a few words. According to Iṣlāḥī, the Qur'ān itself supports this interpretation: the ladies' performance at the banquet is called *kayd* ("stragem, intrigue") by Joseph (50). If the ladies had been so overwhelmed by Joseph's beauty that they accidentally cut their hands, it could hardly be termed *kayd*. Moreover, the king, when he questions the ladies, says (51): *mā khaṭbukunna idh rāwadtunna yūsufa 'an nafsīhi*, "What was the matter with you when you *tried to tempt* Joseph?," a question that would become meaningless if the incident took place as commonly conceived. Joseph also uses the word in vs. 33, another verse that lends support to Iṣlāḥī's contention. It may be noted that the problem which the word *kayd* raises for the traditional interpretation of the episode is practically ignored by Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Taṣīr al-Ṭabarī*, ed. A.M. Shākir and M.M. Shākir, 16 vols. thus far published (Cairo, 1955–), XVI, 137, while the three explanations offered by Maḥmūd b. 'Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf 'an Ḥaqā'iq al-Tanzīl wa 'Uyūn al-Aqāwīl*, 4 vols. (Cairo, 1966), II, 326, are not very convincing, each raising more questions than it answers. Furthermore, the significance of the detail *wa ātat kulla wāḥidatin minhunna sikkīnan* has perhaps never been fully appreciated. It seems unlikely that the Qur'ān mentions the fact that Potiphar's wife provided knives to her guests just to indicate (sophisticated) Egyptians' use of knives and forks at the table. The knives, in my view, were provided in accordance with the preconceived plan of the ladies mentioned above. And it is too often forgotten that vs. 31 contains the word *qaṭṭāna*, which is intensive and implies *takthīr* ("frequency") and *takrīr* ("repetition"), being thus completely unsuitable for an accidental cutting of hands. The suggestion, Ṭabarī, XVI, 77–79, Rāzī, XVIII, 127, that Joseph so bewitched the ladies that they did not realize they were cutting their hands and not fruit is, at best, amusing; hardly more convincing are the equally "interesting" explanations (especially the second of the two) offered by Zamakhsharī, II, 316 under *wa ā' tadat . . . sikkīnan* in that verse.

takes his time leaving prison, it is only because he would first have the truth about the scheming ladies revealed.⁴ When the king sends for him again, he says (54): *i'ŷunī bihi astakhliṣhu li nafsi*, "Bring him to me so that I may have him for my special companion." In other words, Joseph, who has already received his freedom, now receives a special status as well.

Parallels

The plot has a number of parallels which might escape one at a cursory reading of the story but which come into relief upon a close study. Each of these parallels contains points of both similarity and dissimilarity. The following instances illustrate this structural parallelism.

a. In Canaan Joseph is thrown into a pit, in Egypt into prison, each time for a crime he has not committed. The first incident is the result of the brothers' hatred of Joseph, the second of Potiphar's wife's love of Joseph. Upon coming out of the pit, Joseph is sold into slavery; upon release from prison he becomes the virtual ruler of Egypt.

b. The brothers first take Joseph with them and return home without him. Then they take Joseph's real brother, Benjamin, and come back home without him. They take Joseph with them of their own accord and with an evil intention. It is apparently with good intentions that they take Benjamin with them, without whom they would not be able to get grain.

c. The brothers engage in a secret huddle twice, once in Canaan (8–10) and once in Egypt (80–81). The first time it is to dispose of Joseph; the second time to save their own lives.

d. Having failed to win Joseph's attention, the Egyptian ladies sheepishly try to explain their failure by saying that it was an angel they were dealing with. The king's courtiers, unable to interpret his dream, try to cover up their failure by declaring that the dream is devoid of meaning. The ladies meet with failure *after* having made their attempt, the courtiers give up *before* even trying.⁵

f. There are two attempts to win love. The brothers try to win their father's affections—a case of filial love; Potiphar's wife tries to win Joseph's heart—a

⁴ See Rāzī, XVIII, 151–52.

⁵ We know that Potiphar's wife was "avenged" when the ladies failed to impress Joseph (32). We can be reasonably certain that the king, too, was amused by the courtiers' helplessness, for it is with an undertone of sarcasm that he presents his dream before them in the first place (43): *yā ayyuhā 'l-mala'u f'ŷunī fi ru'yāya in kuntum li 'l-ru'yā ta'burūna*, an expression whose tone is not brought out by a literal translation. In addition to the use of the elaborate form of address *yā ayyuhā 'l-mala'u* (which, depending upon context, may connote genuine seriousness, or, as is the case here, irony), the object *ru'yā* has been preposed (*taqdīm*) and a *zā'ida* ("adventitious") prefixed to it (for which see Zamakhshari, II, 323; Rāzī, XVIII, 147), the whole structure thus acquiring an advisedly sluggish quality indicative of the king's amusement at the anticipated failure of the courtiers. The king is really saying: In case you pride yourselves on being experts at interpreting dreams, here is one that should prove a challenge. Cf. Iṣlāḥi, III, 467.

case of sexual love.⁶ The brothers and Potiphar's wife both use intrigue to achieve their objectives.⁷

Dramatic Element

The story contains a rich dramatic element. There are a large number of striking scenes and many intensely dramatic moments. The following are some of the ways in which the drama is created and intensified.

a. The story opens on a dramatic note, setting a tone that is consistently maintained through a rapid succession of logically connected scenes. In the first part of the story Joseph has an unusual dream. The reader immediately senses that the dream is going to be significant, but is left guessing as to what it might mean. When Joseph relates the dream to his father, Jacob could be expected to interpret it, but his immediate response is to warn Joseph to keep it from his brothers. The suspense is heightened, and at the same time the reader is indirectly introduced to Joseph's brothers, who, evidently, are shady characters, in sharp contrast to Joseph as a very virtuous man. It is obvious that a conflict is in the making. The brothers soon appear on the scene, and although Jacob has talked about the possibility of their contriving a *kayd* against Joseph, the full force of that is driven home only when the nature of their plans becomes clear. Mischief is afoot. Jacob resists the brothers' persuasion to let Joseph go with them on a picnic,⁸ but, as one feels is going to happen, he gives in. The brothers return home with a bloody shirt. A caravan meanwhile comes along and their water-scout lifts Joseph out of the well. A shout of joy, for the lad should be worth some silver. But there is also a nervous attempt to hide the newly-found commodity lest a claimant should spring up in the vicinity.⁹ Joseph is off to Egypt, and the story moves with him, one event leading to another, with each new event adding to the total effect.

b. In several instances events foreshadow one another. The foreshadowing, however, does not take place mechanically, with one event blandly hinting at the next, but in such a way as to maintain a delicate balance between the predictable and the unpredictable. To take an example, when Jacob hears Joseph's dream, he cautions him against the brothers' plot, and in the next few verses already we find the brothers busy scheming. What Jacob had feared has come to pass. But

⁶ It is a little different with the Egyptian ladies' attempt to seduce Joseph: they have accepted a challenge thrown by Potiphar's wife and their primary aim is to prove *to her* that they are better acquainted with love's ways.

⁷ The structural parallelism in the story is frequently reflected in linguistic parallelism, some of which will be noted in the verses pertaining to the parallels cited. An obvious case is a., in which the brothers say *wa innā lahu laḥāfīzūna* when they take away Joseph (12) and also when they take away Benjamin (63). And, upon their return to Jacob in each instance, they try to assure him that they are telling the truth (17, 82).

⁸ According to Iṣlāhī, III, 443, the words *yartā' wa ya' ab* in vs. 11 are a beautiful description of a picnic, a favorite recreation of the Bedouins and one that Arab poets speak of with great interest. Cf. Ṭabarī, XV, 569-72; Rāzī, XVIII, 97.

⁹ Iṣlāhī, III, 446, Cf. Ṭabarī, XVI, 4-7.

the element of surprise consists in this, that while Jacob thought that the brothers would resort to *kayd* only if they learnt about Joseph's dream, the brothers do so even though they do not know about the dream.

c. On several occasions in the story something is referred to as if casually, but the reader soon realizes that the reference had a prophetic or ominous ring. The brothers agree on the suggestion that Joseph be cast into a well. The idea is that some caravan might come along and take Joseph out of the well, thus at least saving his life. But this is only a hope the brothers have, they do not know for sure that a caravan will arrive, and will arrive in time to save Joseph; all they are trying to do is to appease their troubled consciences. One gets the impression that the reference to the caravan was not casual after all. Likewise, Jacob fears that a wolf might devour Joseph, and the brothers assure Jacob that this will not happen. Though the brothers could have made up some other excuse, they told Jacob that Joseph had been killed by a wolf—and the reference to the wolf proves to be more than casual.

In sum, the plot of the Joseph story is tightly-woven, there is a pattern to the events that make it up, and a strong dramatic element holds the reader's interest.

II. THEMES

The sura has a number of themes, but we can distinguish between one principal theme and several subsidiary ones, the latter bearing a close relationship to the former.

Principal Theme:

Inexorable Fulfillment of Divine Purposes

a. *God as Ghālib*

The story of Joseph is presented as a dramatic vindication of the thesis that God is dominant and His purposes are inevitably fulfilled. The thesis is presented in vs. 21: *wa 'llāhu ghālibun 'alā amrihi wa lākinna akthara 'l-nāsi lā ya' lamūna*, "God is in complete control of His affairs, but most people have no awareness of it." This verse is central to the sura's meaning, and the keyword in it is *ghālib* ("dominant").

Joseph is placed in the most hopeless situation that one can imagine. Severed from his family, he is sold into slavery in a foreign country with people none too friendly to the Hebrews, and then is cast in prison. The odds are stacked up against him and all hope is cut off. In these utterly bleak circumstances comes into play divine power and, all of a sudden, Joseph finds himself at the pinnacle of fame and power. The dominance of God has been established.

That God is dominant and has complete control over everything is a theme that finds expression elsewhere in the Qur'ān, too. However, this is perhaps the only sura in which that theme is consistently developed throughout. The word *ghālib* as a divine attribute has been used in the Qur'ān only once—in this sura. A verb from the root *GhLB* is used in S. 58:21: *la'aghlibanna anā wa rusulī*, "I,

and My messengers, too, shall triumph.” But this verse speaks only of one kind of dominance, the victory of God and His messengers in their struggle against disbelievers. S. 12:21, on the other hand, gives to the word *ghālib* the widest possible application and the most comprehensive meaning: “God is in complete control of His affairs.” The verse states a principle of universal and absolute validity.¹⁰

b. *God as Laṭīf*

Besides stressing God’s dominance, the sura also highlights one of the ways in which that dominance is actually established. The relevant verse here is vs. 100: *inna rabbī laṭīfun li mā yashā’u*, “God uses subtle means to accomplish whatever He wants.” The keyword is *laṭīf*, “subtle.” As an attribute of God, *laṭīf* has been used elsewhere in the Qur’ān. But a comparative look would reveal that in each of the other occurrences¹¹ the word is limited in its application by the context in which it occurs,¹² whereas in the Sura of Joseph it is, like *ghālib*, quite independent of its immediate context and is used in its widest possible sense.

But an important question arises here: If God is *ghālib*, are His purposes conceived arbitrarily, and, if He is *laṭīf*, are they accomplished through the use of arbitrary means? This leads to a brief consideration of two other attributes.

c. *God as ‘Alīm and Ḥakīm*

Two divine attributes that (in different forms) find frequent, and hence conspicuous, use in the sura are: *‘alīm*, (“All-Knowing”) and *ḥakīm*, (“All-Wise.”) They are used together in the beginning, middle, and end of the story, thus holding the story together and furnishing the reader with the perspective in which the Qur’ān wants him to see the story. Their function is to show that divine purposes, as also the ways to achieve them, are characterized by the profound *ḥikma* (“wisdom”) of an omniscient Being. This is what Jacob means when, in the beginning of the story, he listens to Joseph’s dream and, predicting an illustrious future for him, says that God is *‘alīm* and *ḥakīm* (6). As all the important events are yet to take place, Jacob’s remark is a statement of hope. In the middle part of the story (83) Jacob repeats the remark, which, since the worst possible situations have already occurred, becomes a statement of trust. At the

¹⁰ This is in addition to the fact that *ghālib* is an adjective denoting an enduring quality (*dawām* and *istimrār*), whereas *la’aghlibanna*, a verb, denotes a time-bound quality (*ḥudūth*).

¹¹ Barring S. 42:19, for which see the next note.

¹² S. 6:103 says that while human eyes cannot perceive God, God can perceive man, God being *laṭīf*. S. 22:63 says that God’s help will change the apparently hopeless situation for the believers in the same way in which arid land, upon receiving rain, grows rich vegetation and changes its complexion; God can do this, for He is *laṭīf* (Iṣlāḥī, IV, 418). S. 31:16 says that God will one day resurrect all the dead, bringing forth everything, even if it were a hidden mustard seed, for He is “Subtle” (*ibid.*, V, 129). S. 33:34 assures the Prophet’s wives that if they discharge their duties within the confines of their homes, as they are being instructed to do, their services would not remain unnoticed by God, Who is *laṭīf* (*ibid.*, V, 221–22). According to S. 67:13, God listens to everything and the next verse adds that He can do so because He is *laṭīf*. In S. 42:19, the only other verse in which it occurs, *laṭīf* means “kind, beneficent,” and so does not pertain to our present discussion.

end of the story (100) Joseph makes the same remark, which, now that every problem has been resolved, becomes a statement of gratitude.

The attributes of *'alīm* and *ḥakīm* are thus meant to counterbalance those of *ghālib* and *laṭīf* and to prevent the drawing of the conclusion that God is capricious.¹³ The sura's principal theme, which we have examined with reference to four divine attributes, is succinctly summarized in vs. 100, which explicitly mentions three of the four attributes and clearly implies the fourth: *inna rabbī laṭīfun li mā yashā'u innahu huwa 'l-'alīmu 'l-ḥakīmu*. To offer an explanatory paraphrase of the verse: God, although He has control over everything and has His subtle ways of accomplishing whatever He wants, always acts in accordance with certain rules He himself has laid down (in the Qur'anic terminology, *sunna*. "norm, law") in His infinite wisdom, for He alone is possessed of all knowledge and, as such, knows what course of action would be the most appropriate one in any situation.

Subsidiary Themes

Like the rest of the Qur'ān, the Sura of Joseph is as anthropocentric as it is theocentric. Besides expounding certain divine attributes, therefore, it also explains how man should conduct himself toward a God possessing those attributes. This brings us to the sura's subsidiary themes.

a. Working in Harmony with the Purposes of God: Requisite Qualities

The first of these themes is that man, instead of opposing God, should work in harmony with His purposes, or, what is the same thing, in harmony with the moral laws He has prescribed for man's guidance. In order to do so, man needs to have certain qualities, which, according to the sura, are three: *'ilm* ("knowledge"), *tawakkul* ("trust [in God]"), and *iḥsān* ("good action").

To certain chosen individuals who are supposed to guide mankind—to prophets, that is—God gives a special understanding of His laws. Jacob and Joseph are such individuals. We are told about Jacob, for example, (68): *wa innahu laḏhū 'ilmin li mā 'allamnāhu*, "Indeed he possessed special knowledge, as a result of Our teaching of him" (also 86, 92). As for ordinary people, they must acquire this knowledge from those who have been blessed with it by God: it is this knowledge that Joseph tries to impart to his prison-mates and which, in a different context, Joseph's brothers refuse to acquire from Jacob. Vs. 86 explicitly indicates that while Jacob possesses such knowledge, the brothers do not.

¹³ But if God's ways are not arbitrary, are they inscrutable? For they may be inscrutable without being arbitrary. The Qur'anic answer would seem to be in the negative, as I understand the category of "inscrutability." Cf., however, Gerhard von Rad's remark: "Obviously these striking narrative sections are meant to . . . cause the reader to read the entire story of Jacob with respect to the inscrutability and freedom of God's ways." *Genesis: A Commentary*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), p. 31.

The second quality is *tawakkul*. The word occurs in vs. 67: '*alayhi tawakkaltu wa 'alayhi fa 'l-yatawakkali 'l-mutawakkilūna*, "I [Jacob] have placed my trust in Him, and those who have to place their trust should place it in Him alone." Although Jacob possesses the first quality par excellence, he still needs this second quality, for human 'ilm, no matter how great, can never be complete or adequate (see 76, last part). *Tawakkul* thus supplies the deficiencies of human knowledge and serves as an emotional ballast in situations in which cognitive knowledge fails to complete solace. Joseph, too, possesses this quality. And, again, as borne out by the whole story (and hinted subtly but powerfully in 67), the brothers lack it.

Although Jacob certainly possesses the third quality, *ihsān*, as far as the story is concerned, it is Joseph who possesses it in the highest degree, and the adjective *muhsin* is used in the sura with explicit or implicit reference to Joseph only. This is appropriate because *ihsān* is an active virtue and it is Joseph, not Jacob, who bears the brunt of the action in the story and so has to display this quality in practice. A concise definition of *ihsān* is provided in vs. 90: *innahu man yattaqī wa yaṣbir fa inna 'llāha lā yuḏī'u ajra 'l-muhsinīna*, "Indeed those who practice *taqwā* (moral restraint) and *ṣabr* (perseverance), God does not set at naught the reward of those who do good actions." In other words, *ihsān* is a combination of *taqwā* and *ṣabr*. *Ṣabr* means "to remain steadfast in the face of difficulties"; *tawqā* means "to hold one's own in the face of temptations." The former helps people to overcome their tendency to shun danger and hardship, the latter helps people to overcome their inclination toward the glamorous and the alluring. The two are complementary opposites and together sum up all the trials and tribulations Joseph goes through successfully, the reason why he so eminently deserves the title of *muhsin*. And the brothers lack *ihsān*, too. In fact they possess the quality of *zulm*, "iniquity," which is an exact antithesis of *ihsān*, as evidenced by the following. When the brothers suggest to Joseph, whom they call *muhsin* (78), that he detain one of them in place of Benjamin, he replies (79): *innā idhan la mina 'l-zālimīna*, "In that case we shall prove to be iniquitous." And, in an ironical situation, they condemn themselves out of their mouths. Upon being asked how a thief should be punished, they reply that he should be made the slave of the person whose property he has stolen, and then add (75): *kadhālika najzī 'l-zālimīna*, "This is how we punish the iniquitous."

It is, then, with the aid of 'ilm, *tawakkul*, and *ihsān*, as exemplified in the persons of Jacob and Joseph, that one can hope to work in harmony with God's purposes.

b. *Balanced View of the Relationship between Divine Decree and Human Freedom*

To the theme of working in harmony with the purposes of God is related the theme of striking a proper balance between divine decree and human freedom. "Divine decree" and "human freedom" are generally denoted in Urdu by the convenient (Arabic) words *taqdīr* and *tadbīr*, respectively, and I will use these instead of the more technical theological terms.

One of the points the sura makes is that while the scheme of existence is ultimately determined by God, this does not absolve man of the responsibility of taking moral initiative. Jacob has complete trust in God, and yet he realizes that he must make use of his judgment and discretion. When the brothers request him to send Benjamin with them to Egypt, he takes more than one precaution. First he makes them pledge that they will try their best to bring Benjamin back. Then he advises them to enter Egypt in several small groups, each from a different gate, for as a large group of possibly rich foreigners they could attract the unwelcome attention of lawless elements at a time when conditions of famine have probably resulted in an increased incidence of crime.¹⁴ The expedient, he is quick to point out, cannot protect them against a contrary divine decree if such a decree exists. Thus Jacob puts on the whole matter a perspective born of a balanced understanding of the relationship between *tadbīr* and *taqdir* (66-67).¹⁵

Like Jacob, Joseph, too, has struck an ideal balance between *taqdir* and *tadbīr*. When he interprets the dreams of the two prison-mates, he asks one of them, the one he thinks will be released, to mention him to the king. He rightly thinks that it is not irreligious or improper for him to think of ways and means of securing his release from a situation in which he has been placed through no fault of his own.

c. Trial, Recompense, and Repentance

The last subsidiary theme is composed of three subthemes, those of trial, recompense, and repentance.

Trial. The concept of trial is basic to Qur'anic thought. The very purpose of human life is conceived in terms of trial (S. 67:2): *alladhī khalaqa 'l-mawta wa 'l-ḥayāta li yablūwakum ayyukum aḥsanu 'amalan*, "God, Who created death and life in order to put you to the test and determine who among you will perform better deeds." The particular aspect of the theme of trial that is highlighted in this sura is that no one is exempt from trial, not even prophets. When the story opens, Joseph has yet to become a prophet, but he is made to go through a series of ordeals. Jacob is already a prophet, but he, too, is tried in several ways. Since no one is exempt from being tried, the Qur'an would appear to be advising constant moral readiness.

Recompense. Recompense, too, is a major Qur'anic theme, and there is a certain aspect of it that receives emphasis in this sura. From the Islamic point of view, the present world is the world of trial and action (*dār al-ʿamal*) whereas it is the hereafter that is the world of recompense (*dār al-jazā*). But this does not mean that no recompense is given in this world at all, or that it is wrong to work and hope for worldly success (in accordance with the principles of religion and morality). Such success is presented as a positive good in the Sura of Joseph. Vs.

¹⁴ Iṣlāḥī, III, 486-87. For the traditional explanation of Jacob's advice, see Ṭabarī, XVI, 165-66; Rāzi, XVIII, 170-72.

¹⁵ Iṣlāḥī, III, 487. Cf. Rāzi, XVIII, 175. We have already noted Jacob's advice to Joseph to keep his dream from the brothers and his reluctance in sending Joseph with the brothers for fear he might come to harm.

90, quoted above, speaks of reward for good actions, and the reference is primarily, if not exclusively, to success and prosperity in this life.

Repentance. The third subtheme is also related to the first. As long as a person lives, he remains subject to the *sunna* ("law") of trial and is put to one test after another. But failure on a test should not cause despair, for there is always hope: the door of repentance is open. The point is driven home in one of the final episodes of the story, in which Joseph's brothers realize their mistake and sincerely repent, asking their father to pray for their forgiveness, Jacob agreeing to do so.

The distinction drawn here between the principal and the subsidiary themes is obviously not absolute. Ultimately, all these themes interpenetrate, and it is possible to lay greater stress on one of them rather than on the other. What one must insist on, though, is that all of them be considered in their relationship to each other so that a well-rounded conception of the sura's thematic structure results.

III. CHARACTERS

General

A study of the characters of the Qur'anic story of Joseph is a study in Qur'anic realism. The Qur'an draws a sharp distinction between good and bad characters, the former (model) characters to be imitated,¹⁶ the latter (evil) characters whose example is to be shunned. In spite of this crucial distinction, the humanity of the characters is never compromised: the Qur'an draws its pictures in the authentic colors of real life. Not only the bad, but also the good characters of the story are real. The latter in particular come alive with full force, facing the ups and downs of life like the rest of humanity.

The Sura of Joseph is a dramatization of the Qur'anic view of the relationship between character and action. As already noted, every individual must go through a series of trials. But success or failure in these trials is not predetermined in the sense that a good character will necessarily succeed, while an evil character will necessarily fail. Success or failure in a moral struggle is the result of independent choices made and executed *during* the struggle itself. Joseph does not succeed in the crises he finds himself in simply because he possesses innate goodness. In each situation he has to wage a struggle, acutely conscious that unless he calls forth all his moral strength, he might very well yield to the temptations that are being thrown his way. If it is true that a person succeeds in a moral struggle *because* he possesses a good character, the converse is equally true: a man comes to possess a good character *because* he faces the moral struggle with vision and resolution. This seems to be the Qur'anic

¹⁶ CF. von Rad on the patriarchs in Genesis, *Genesis*, p. 36: "Above all, one must ask where and in what sense Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph are meant by the narrator to be understood as models, by virtue of their own actions or of divine providence. . . ."

understanding of the relationship between character and action. As can be seen, it is a dynamic relationship in which nothing is taken for granted.

But while on the one hand a person might fail in a given situation because he has conducted himself poorly, there is, on the other hand, no reason why he should not succeed if he acquits himself in a satisfactory manner. The good characters of *Sūrat Yūsuf* are presented as ideal because they have convincingly proved in real life that they deserved to succeed. In the term Qur'anic realism used above, "realism" does not mean or imply that every individual necessarily has some serious failings, or at least a few blemishes. The point is that the characters are placed in situations involving a genuine test of their moral fiber and affording an equal opportunity of meeting with success and failure; success must be *no less possible* than failure.¹⁷

Major Characters

a. Jacob

The strating point of the dramatic conflict in the story is Jacob's love for Joseph, or, more accurately, the brothers' perception of this love. But while the brothers think that Jacob's love for Joseph is senseless because it is they, not Joseph, who are an *'uṣba* ("strong group"), the Qur'ān seems to indicate that Jacob's partiality for Joseph is based on the former's recognition of Joseph's exceptional talents: Jacob already feels that, among all of his sons, Joseph alone is qualified to carry on the Abrahamic tradition after him, and he is confirmed in his view after he learns about Joseph's dream.

Jacob, then, is perceptive. He is extremely sensitive, too. He loses his eyesight from grief at the loss of Joseph. Another aspect of his sensitive nature is that he possesses what we may call telepathic powers: he is able to "smell" Joseph when Joseph's tunic is on its way to Canaan (94); he regains his eyesight when the tunic is put over him (96).

Jacob, as depicted by the Qur'ān, is anything but credulous. He refuses to believe the brothers' story about Joseph's death (18); actually, as vss. 5, 11, and 14 show, he is already suspicious of the brothers, and it is only reluctantly that he allows, first Joseph, and then Benjamin, to accompany them.

We have seen that Jacob represents an ideal combination of *tadbīr* and *taqdīr*: his boundless trust in God does not prevent him from taking precautions against impending danger. But when his precautions fail, he bears the misfortune resolutely, crying his heart out, yes, but to God only (86). In the presence of people he exercises remarkable self-control, choking back his grief (*kaẓīm*, 84), his faith in God unshaken. He not only possesses *ṣabr*, he possesses it in its most praiseworthy form: *ṣabr jamīl* (18, 83).

¹⁷ Cf. von Rad, *ibid.*: "The figures of the patriarchs are presented with a matter-of-fact realism which by no means suppresses those things that move and concern mankind, and on some occasions weakness and failure are brought out with unrelieved harshness. . . ." It would also appear that the following statement by Franz Delitzsch (quoted in von Rad, *ibid.*, p. 37, note) would not at all represent the Qur'anic idea of realism: "By the yardstick of the Old Testament even Tamar, with all her going astray, is a saint because of her wisdom, her tenderness, her nobility."

b. *Joseph*

As a young boy, Joseph is shy, modest, and respectful. While telling his father about the dream, he uses the word *ra'aytu* (4) twice. This has dramatic significance¹⁸ and also gives a clue to his character. He knows the interpretation of the dream¹⁹ and is therefore hesitant to report the dream to his father because the latter might think he is being presumptuous. That is why, after having begun to relate it, he breaks off in the middle. And yet he realizes that he must go on, and so he repeats the word *ra'aytu*, completing the statement.²⁰ Also noteworthy is the fact that he mentions the sun and the moon—his parents—*after* the stars—his brothers—, out of respect delaying mentioning his parents.²¹

As a grown man Joseph is humble and fully conscious of the power of the baser self to draw a person into sin and error (*wa mā ubarri'u nafsī inna 'l-nafsa la'ammāratun bi 'l-sū'i*, 53). That is why he not only prays to God for help against temptations (24, 33, 53), he himself stays morally alert, too.

During his prison term we observe a few other traits of his personality. First, we see him as a remarkable interpreter of dreams. Second, we see him as a person who takes his beliefs seriously and propagates the truth he believes in (35–40). When the prison-mates approach him for an interpretation of their dreams, he takes it as a good opportunity to acquaint them with the fundamentals of the Abrahamic faith.²² Third, the manner in which he presents his religious convictions to them testifies to his astute intelligence. Mealtimes must have been an exception to the otherwise unrelieved monotony of an Egyptian prison, and the prisoners, one can imagine, looked forward to them. Joseph assures the two young men that he will interpret their dreams before the next meal arrives. This must have convinced the two men that Joseph considers their dreams important enough to devote some time reflecting on them. At the same time, Joseph creates for himself an excellent opportunity to share his convictions with them.²³ Fourth, Joseph must have distinguished himself in prison as a man of upright character: the two young men testify that he is a *muḥsin* (36), and when the butler comes back to Joseph for an interpretation of the king's dream, he calls him *ṣiddīq*, literally "very truthful," but really a compact word for a man who is virtuous in every sense.²⁴ Fifth, prison life, instead of breaking him down, confirms him in his fierce sense of honor. He was thrown into prison because he put honor over immorality. After many years'

¹⁸ Zamakhsharī argues (II, 302) that there is no repetition because the second use of *ra'aytu* is a reply to an unexpressed question (*laysa bi takrār in namā huwa kalāmun musta'nafun 'alā taqḍīri su'ālin waqā'a jawāban lahu . . .*). This is grammatically correct (as most traditional explanations of such points are) but misses the dramatic element altogether (as most traditional explanations do).

¹⁹ That he does is indicated by the fact that he uses masculine forms (pronoun *hum* and participle *sājidīn*) in describing the heavenly bodies. Cf. Ṭabarī, XV, 556–57; Zamakhsharī, II, 302–303.

²⁰ Iṣlāḥī, III, 436–37.

²¹ Cf. Zamakhsharī, II, 302. The sequence given in Genesis (37:9) is: the sun, the moon, and the stars.

²² Mawḍūdī, *Tafhīm al-Qur'ān*, 6 vols. (Lahore, 1949–1972), II, 402–404; Iṣlāḥī, III, 464.

²³ Iṣlāḥī, III, 463–66. Also, Zamakhsharī, II, 320. Cf. Rāzī, XVIII, 136.

²⁴ Iṣlāḥī, III, 463, 468; Mawḍūdī, II, 400, 406. Also, Zamakhsharī, III, 302.

imprisonment, his spirit remains indomitable; he refuses to come out of prison without making sure that the plot of which he is an innocent victim is laid open. He would like to have his freedom, but not at the cost of honor.

Joseph is successful as a ruler and administrator. He proves his claim (55) that he is just, honest, and competent. And it is as a result of his benevolence that foreigners come to him for aid during the years of famine.

He 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 (58). Also, the scheme he devises to detain Benjamin in Egypt (a scheme which is part of a larger scheme to bring a few truths home to the brothers) is skillfully executed and involves beautiful instances of wordplay.

And he is forgiving. At the very moment that he has his brothers in his power, he announces (92): *lā tathrība ‘alaykumu l-yawma*, “No blame rests on you today,” treating his brothers with kindness and honor.

c. *The Brothers*

At the bottom of the brothers' common dislike of Joseph²⁵ is their view that status goes with physical might; their self-confidence is based on their being a strong band (*uṣba*, 14). The Qur'ān depicts them as people who lack “awareness” (15), awareness of divine purposes. This results in *jahl* on their part (89), *jahl* meaning not only “ignorance” but also (in fact primarily) “reckless conduct.” This is all the more unfortunate because they belong to a prophet's family.

They are crafty fellows and resort to intrigue to achieve their objectives. But they do not seem to be highly imaginative. Seeing that Jacob is already apprehensive that Joseph might be devoured by a wolf, they do not bother to think up some other explanation for the missing Joseph; of course a wolf devoured him!²⁶

In the end the brothers admit their mistakes and errors, acknowledging Joseph's special and privileged position (91). Renouncing their pride and arrogance, and acknowledging that they had committed wrongs against Jacob and Joseph both, they admit their guilt before both (91, before Joseph; 97, before Jacob).

d. *Potiphar's Wife*

She is, first of all, lascivious. Frustration in satisfying her lust leads her to act aggressively, failing which she becomes vengeful. She is obviously a scheming woman: she not only plots to seduce Joseph, she also works out a scheme with the avowed aim of shaming her rival ladies, who have bragged about the power

²⁵ At least one of the brothers (Reuben, according to Ṭabari [XVI, 207–208], Judah, according to Zamakhshari [II, 305; but see *ibid.*, II, 336–37]) has a soft corner for Joseph and is instrumental in saving his life.

²⁶ *Islāhī*, III, 445.

of their charms. The latter incident is an indication, perhaps, of the lengths to which the Egyptian nobility could go in flaunting their debauchery.

She is prepared to lie, blatantly, if necessary (25). But in the end she is willing to accept blame, although the reasons remain somewhat unclear; is it because the truth is about to be revealed, or because, as has been suggested,²⁷ Joseph, in his demand for an investigation of the scandal, leaves out her name, an act that finally convinces her of the nobility of his character.

She is a self-confident and strong-headed woman, a trait clearly reflected in her aggressive behavior toward Joseph and the ladies. And there are indications that she plays a dominating role also at home. When she fails to win Joseph, she boasts that she can have Joseph imprisoned. Joseph does go to prison, which means that Potiphar, who alone had the power to arrange this, listened to his wife, who had not boasted in vain.

Minor Characters

Because of the significant detail provided about them even the minor characters of the story become vivid and memorable. We will note only two examples.

a. *The Caravaneers*

The caravaneers are on the scene for a length of two verses only (19–20). They are described as people with an eye on the main chance. The water-scout cannot hide his delight at his discovery and exclaims with joy, which is shared by the rest of the party. The joy is tempered with discretion, and there is a hurried attempt to hide Joseph for fear someone might claim him. Once in Egypt, they quickly dispose of Joseph, probably to the first bidder.²⁸

b. *Potiphar*

Potiphar is a minor character from the viewpoint of the story. He himself speaks only on two occasions (in 21, 28–29), but the impression of a person with a keen mind is conveyed clearly. Upon buying Joseph, he perceives that Joseph belongs to a noble family and is the victim of misfortune, and so he asks his wife to take good care of Joseph, even suggesting that they might adopt him.²⁹ And upon weighing evidence, he is quick to figure out that the attempt at seduction was made by his wife.

He is basically fair-minded and can rebuke his wife for her machinations. But he seems to be prone to making generalizations, for his criticism of his wife extends to cover all womankind (28).³⁰ Or did he generalize on that occasion

²⁷ Rāzī, XVIII, 152–53.

²⁸ Iṣlāhī, III, 446.

²⁹ Ibid., III, 447.

³⁰ Cf. ibid., III, 453–54.

because it afforded him an opportunity to protest against her domineering attitude? In Zamakhshari's language: his wife held him under a tight rein.³¹

On the other hand, Potiphar is not above saving his reputation at the cost of the innocent Joseph and, if he was not directly instrumental in having Joseph imprisoned, must at least have condoned the idea. And yet the overall impression is that of a good man at heart, whose failings are mostly of a passive type—he does not initiate evil, but now and then he allows himself to be used by others, primarily by his wife.

In a sense, *Sūrat Yūsuf* is a story in which there are no losers. All the “villains” are reformed in the end. In spite of that, one continues to feel that the distinction between the good and the bad characters is not completely erased. Although the brothers repent and Potiphar's wife admits her mistake (as do the noblewomen), the atmosphere remains charged with the conflict that took place between the good and the not-so-good characters, and the tensions created in the plot remain vividly in the reader's mind.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article I have attempted to show that the Qur'anic story of Joseph effectively presents a set of interrelated themes using a tightly-knit plot and employing a variety of characters in a state of dynamic interaction. A systematic literary study of the Qur'ān is badly needed, and the story of Joseph could perhaps serve as a good starting point.

If the analysis presented in this article is basically correct, then we are faced with the question to what extent the Sura of Joseph is typical or atypical of Qur'anic composition in general. Is there a similar structure also in other parts of the Qur'ān? Is there in the Qur'ān, underlying all the differences, a definite pattern of composition which is then adapted to meet the specific needs of different suras? In this context simply raising the question must suffice.

This study has focused on a few selected aspects of the story, though there are other dimensions (for example, that of irony) that call for an in-depth look. In analyzing the story I have confined myself largely to the data furnished by the Qur'ān, and have not made any explicit comparisons between the Qur'anic and Biblical accounts of the story.³² Such a comparative study, if undertaken along the lines here followed, could well throw new light on some of the hitherto insufficiently explored aspects of the relationship between the two scriptures.

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³¹ Zamakhshari, II, 319, *zimāmuhu fī yadihā*.

³² For two such attempts, radically different in nature, see John Macdonald, “Joseph in the Qur'ān,” *MW*, XLVI (1956), 113–31 and 207–24, and Marilyn Robinson Waldman, “New Approaches to ‘Biblical’ Materials in the Qur'ān,” *MW*, LXXV (1985), 1–16.