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Inquiring of Joseph

Getting to Know a Biblical Character through the Qur'an

John Kaltner

A Michael Glazier Book

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INTRODUCTION

The account of Joseph and his family that is found in Genesis 37–50 is one of the best-known stories in the entire Bible. It is an extended narrative that traces the fall and rise of a young man from Canaan who literally bottoms out in a well only to attain a position of such power and prominence that people from all over the world come to Egypt to grovel at his feet. Along the way Joseph finds himself in some tight spots and compromising situations that rival anything Indiana Jones ever encountered.

It's your classic rags-to-riches plot with enough twists and turns to satisfy the cravings of the most well-read mystery novel fan. Like all good stories, Joseph's explores themes that have troubled and titillated people throughout history and into our own day. What distinguishes it from most of them is the wide range of such topics it treats in a relatively brief text. Murder, adultery, power, betrayal, sibling rivalry, greed, natural disaster, and mistaken identity are all prominently featured in this story, which presents Joseph as the ultimate survivor. This is the stuff television miniseries are made of, although at times it seems that a soap opera might be a more appropriate vehicle to portray the events of Joseph's life.

To put it simply, it is a great story because it addresses issues that concern us all and it does so in a way that is engaging and memorable. In this book we will consider how and why the story of Joseph and his family has such a powerful effect on its readers. We will do this by employing some of the methods commonly used by Bible scholars and others who analyze texts. In particular, we will make use of approaches that have proved to be helpful in the study of works, like the Joseph story, that are written in narrative form. Comparative analysis is a method commonly employed by Bible scholars that has been quite helpful in determining both what the Bible shares in common with literature from other times and places and what is distinctive or unique about it. Another approach we will utilize is called narrative criticism, which attempts to study how stories are composed and the various elements that comprise them. When we read the Joseph story with the tools provided by comparative analysis and narrative criticism we are in a position to answer some of the questions typically raised

by rhetorical criticism, a third methodology that will inform the approach adopted throughout this book. One of the primary aims of rhetorical analysis is to discover how a text attempts to persuade its reader to think a certain way about the characters and events of the story. The following chapters will show how an attentive reading of the text that makes use of these methodologies—comparative analysis, narrative criticism, and rhetorical criticism—can enhance the reader's understanding and enjoyment of the Joseph story.

A Tale of Two Josephs: Comparative Analysis

Since the nineteenth century many texts from ancient Near Eastern cultures have been discovered, deciphered, and compared to sections of the Bible. The majority of these texts have come from Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Canaan, and most of them predate the biblical material. An underlying assumption of scholars' attempts to read these texts in light of the Bible is that they can somehow allow us to better understand the biblical literature. The results of these efforts have varied, depending on the nature of the extra-biblical evidence and the methods (and, sometimes, the personal agendas) of the scholars studying them.

On rare occasions texts have been unearthed that are almost word-for-word parallels to what is contained in the Bible. An example of this can be seen in Prov 22:17–24:34, a collection of wisdom sayings closely mirrored in the Egyptian work "The Instruction of Amenemope" from around 1100 B.C.E. Most of the time the relationships between the Bible and other ancient Near Eastern writings are less obvious, but the latter often still prove very useful to Bible scholars. They can provide valuable information regarding the contexts out of which the Bible emerged, the genres of writing found within it, the themes it treats, and even the meanings of obscure Hebrew words. Biblical laws, prophetic texts, creation accounts, royal annals, and wisdom literature are just a few of the many types of biblical literature that have benefited from such comparative analysis.

By way of illustration we can cite a few well-known examples of the impact this kind of study has had on the field of biblical studies. Both the biblical story of creation that is found in Gen 1:1–2:4a and the account of Noah and the Flood (Genesis 6–9) have often been compared to Mesopotamian texts discovered in the nineteenth century that are much older than the biblical material. In the view of some scholars these ancient Near Eastern texts contain some provocative parallels to the Genesis versions of the events that raise important questions about the origin and background of the biblical accounts.

In 1928 a trove of texts and other material dating back to the fourteenth century B.C.E. was discovered in northern Canaan and immediately had an impact on biblical scholarship. The texts were written in a previously unknown language that was given the name Ugaritic (from the city-state of Ugarit where they were found) and proved to be from the same linguistic family as Hebrew. The close philological and grammatical links between the two languages have made the corpus of Ugaritic writings a valuable tool in understanding problematic Hebrew words and structures that had been troubling Bible scholars for generations. In addition, the Ugaritic texts provided remarkably detailed information on the nature of Canaanite religion during the period when Israelite religion began to emerge in the same general area. For the first time scholars had background information on the worship of Canaanite deities mentioned in the Bible like Baal and El, and they could better understand the context in which Israelite religion began to take shape.

As noted, most of these texts from the ancient Near East were produced before the various works that now comprise the Hebrew Bible were written down and eventually, at a much later date, collected together. Scholars have long debated when the different sections of the Hebrew Bible were written and how they were given their final shape in the form we have today. But most agree that even the oldest portions of the text (the issue of exactly which portions these are is not completely settled) were composed centuries after some of the ancient Near Eastern material to which the Bible has been compared.

There is also a sizeable body of material that is contemporaneous with or later than the Hebrew Bible and that has been studied in light of it and compared to it. Most of these sources are of Jewish origin and can therefore be designated as "biblically affiliated" to distinguish them from other ancient Near Eastern writings that come from contexts that are culturally, chronologically, and theologically farther removed from the Hebrew Bible. Many of these writings, like the midrashim and the Talmud, come from the rabbis. The term *"midrashim"* refers to those rabbinic writings that treat passages of the Hebrew Bible by commenting on them and often adding to them by filling in gaps in the text or answering the questions and solving the problems the texts raise. The Talmud (there are actually two versions, one that originated in Palestine in the fifth century C.E. and the other from Babylon about a century later) is a collection of rabbinic commentary on Jewish law, including legal material found in the Hebrew Bible. Both the midrashim and the Talmud are regularly consulted by Bible scholars as they attempt to understand and interpret the biblical material.

Various translations and versions of the biblical text are also frequently studied and compared to one another. One of the main texts of comparison is

the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible that was done in Alexandria, Egypt in the third century B.C.E. It is not an exact word-for-word translation of the Hebrew text since significant differences exist between the two versions. In places the Septuagint includes material not present in the Hebrew text and elsewhere it leaves out entire sections of it. One of the most interesting examples of this can be seen in the book of Jeremiah, whose length is about one-eighth shorter in the Greek version than it is in the Hebrew.

A similar phenomenon can be observed in the Dead Sea Scrolls, a cache of biblical and non-biblical writings whose discovery in the 1940s is considered by many to be the greatest archaeological find of the twentieth century. Among the fragments and manuscripts found at the Dead Sea are the oldest examples of biblical texts in existence. When these versions are compared to what is written in the Bible as we have received it, many differences, some of them quite significant, can be observed. Study of how the biblical material compares to the evidence found in the Septuagint, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and versions written in other languages often raises some very important questions about the formation and transmission of the Bible.

As this brief survey suggests, the practice of comparing the Bible with other writings, both "foreign" and closer to home, has a long history within biblical scholarship. There is another body of biblically affiliated material that is less frequently studied. In fact, most people are shocked to discover that it has any association with the Bible whatsoever. I am referring to the Qur'an, the sacred text of Islam, which is the faith of more than one billion people throughout the world today. Non-Muslims, especially Jews and Christians, are often quite surprised to discover that the Qur'an has much in common with the Bible, but there is no denying that this is the case. Of particular interest to us is the fact that the Qur'an frequently refers to figures mentioned in the Bible and contains many stories associated with these characters that are clear parallels to biblical traditions. Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Jesus himself are among those who play prominent roles in Islam's sacred text. Another biblical character who is featured in the Qur'an is Joseph, whose story will be the focus of our attention.

How this material ended up in the Qur'an is a question whose answer depends on who is doing the asking. According to Muslims the Qur'an is the verbatim word of God (*allah* in Arabic) that was communicated to the prophet Muhammad through the agency of the angel Gabriel in seventh-century C.E. Arabia. It renders all prior revelations, like the Bible, obsolete and is meant to serve as a guide for all humanity. One of the recurring themes throughout the text is the need for people to submit (in Arabic, *islām*) to Allah's will, and the one who does so is called a *muslim*. That same message was sent to prior prophets like the biblical ones mentioned above, but

their followers distorted it and did not preserve it in its authentic form. This necessitated the sending of a final prophet, Muhammad, with the definitive and unaltered form of the message (the Qur'an) that serves as a corrective to all previous versions.

For Muslims, then, the presence of "biblical" stories in their text is to be expected since Allah has spoken to these prior prophets and figures of the past. But they consider the Qur'an's account to be the only accurate one. In those places where the Bible conforms to the contents and message of their text it is legitimate divine revelation. But where it differs we have an indication of those places where the Bible was tampered with and distorted.

This is, of course, not how Jews and Christians understand the relationship between the Qur'an and the Bible. In fact, many of them find the Muslim view of the Bible to be an insult and affront to their faith. Some Bible readers hurl the charge of distortion back at the Qur'an and claim that the Islamic text is derivative or a product of Muhammad's fertile imagination. Others have gone to the extreme of maintaining that the Qur'an is the work of the devil. Not all Jewish and Christian assessments of the relationship between the two books have been negative. Some have preferred to focus on the similarities between the Bible and the Qur'an and the opportunities they present for dialogue and mutual understanding among the members of the monotheistic faiths. Others see the lack of agreement in the two texts as evidence of the way God speaks in different ways to people in different contexts.

However one chooses to understand the shared stories in the Qur'an and the Bible, their presence in the two books holds the potential for a positive outcome. It can allow believers from each side to learn something about the beliefs and worldview of the other side while simultaneously learning something about their own. Just as reading texts from the ancient Near East can help improve our understanding of the Bible, so too can a consideration of the way the Qur'an tells the stories increase our appreciation of the forms they take in their biblical context. That is a basic premise of this book, and it is the main reason why we will engage in a comparative analysis of the Joseph story in the Qur'an and the Bible. We are not interested in the question of who got the story right and who got it wrong. Rather, our concern is with the different ways the two books tell the tale and the impact this difference has on the reader.

The Joseph story in the Qur'an is unusual for a couple of reasons. It takes up virtually the entirety of chapter 12 in the Islamic text, the only one of the book's 114 chapters that comprises a single narrative. In addition, at about one hundred verses it is the longest narrative the Qur'an contains. The overall plot of the Islamic version mirrors that of the biblical one, but, as is

the case with all the stories the two books share, there are some significant differences between them. When we put the two of them side by side, as we will be doing, the story clearly becomes a tale of two Josephs. He and the other characters often speak and act in noticeably different ways in the two accounts. This has an impact on how the reader experiences the story and the lessons he or she takes away from it. A comparative analysis that puts the Bible and the Qur'an in conversation with each other enables us to recognize the differences between the accounts and also sheds light on aspects of each that we might normally miss. An approach that employs the tools of narrative criticism is the most effective means of realizing that goal. Before we discuss that methodology, a few final comments on the Qur'an are in order.

This book does not pretend to be an introduction to the Qur'an. It is my hope that you will learn some things about Islam's sacred text after reading this book, but what you learn will be just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. A more complete introduction to the Qur'an can be attained by consulting some of the books listed in the bibliography at the end. It is also not my intent to give you a false sense of the contents of the Qur'an. While narrative is found throughout the book and biblical figures play an important role in it, most of the text is quite different in tone and content from what you will be exposed to here. The best way to complete the picture, of course, is to read more of the Qur'an, and some English editions are recommended in the bibliography.

As stated above, the Qur'an's Joseph story can allow us to read and think about its more familiar Genesis counterpart from a fresh perspective. Equally important is the opportunity it provides for non-Muslims to learn something about Islam, the most misunderstood religion in the world. Contrary to what many people think, Islam is a religion of peace that does not teach its followers to hate the members of other faiths. It has a great deal in common with the other monotheistic traditions, but adherents of all three religions typically spend far too much time focusing on what divides them and fail to appreciate all they have in common. At no time in history has an acknowledgment of our shared heritage as children of Abraham been more necessary than it is now. It is my hope that the experience of looking at Joseph through Joseph's eyes might serve as a model for interreligious dialogue among Muslims, Christians, and Jews.

Seeing the Big Picture: Narrative Criticism

In recent decades it has become increasingly common for scholars to read and analyze biblical stories as just that: stories. When critical study of the Bible began to take shape in the eighteenth century the primary emphasis was placed on getting behind the text to understand its origin and formation. Consequently, a great deal of attention was paid to matters like the possible sources, likely authors, and originating contexts of the material that comprises the Bible. This had the effect of causing scholars to think of the Bible and the individual books within it primarily as collections of discrete and separate works. The names of some of the methods that emerged as a result of this approach—source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism (which studies the editorial process of combining sources)—reflect this view of the biblical material.

Studying the text in this way, often referred to as the historical-critical method, has proved to be a success because it has increased our understanding of the complex nature of the Bible. But, like all approaches, it has its limitations. One of the drawbacks is that it does not always pay sufficient attention to the text as a whole since many of the questions the historical-critical method seeks to address concern the prehistory of the text. In other words, this method is often more interested in the process of how the Bible came to be than in the final product. To use an analogy from the world of art, Bible scholars can sometimes be like a person who stands before a painting and is fixated by the individual colors but fails to appreciate how they all fit together to create an object of beauty. The big picture is missed.

More recently other approaches have been developed that attempt to take in the big picture and are less interested in how biblical texts reached the form in which we now have them. These approaches do not ask questions about the possible sources behind a text or how those sources were edited together. They are concerned only with the end result of that editorial process and ask questions about the text as we have it, as it is read and experienced by people.

Narrative criticism is one of these newer approaches. Since the middle of the twentieth century biblical scholars have begun to draw upon the methods and insights of scholars who study other bodies of literature such as novels, folk tales, and works of mythology. As they have applied to the biblical material what they have learned from these literary critics, new ways of studying and interpreting the Bible have emerged. Rhetorical criticism, reader-response criticism, structuralism, and narrative criticism are some of the major approaches that have emerged within biblical scholarship as a result of this collaboration.

This way of studying the Bible makes sense the more one thinks about it. It might seem strange to some to refer to parts of a sacred text like the Bible as "stories," but that is exactly what they are. In fact, story, or narrative, is the form that dominates a significant portion of the Bible. Why not study that material with the tools that have proved to be most effective for

that task even if those tools were initially designed for non-biblical literature? To refuse to do so would be like refusing to attach a keyboard to a computer because keyboards were originally created for typewriters.

Narrative criticism is primarily interested in how stories are structured and arranged. It pays attention to the elements of a narrative that serve as its building blocks and give it shape. Like all forms of literature, stories make use of certain conventions and literary devices that are employed by the author in order to communicate with the reader. Narrative criticism studies how these various aspects function in a given story. This book discusses some of the major elements of narratives as they are found in the Joseph story in the Qur'an and the Bible. The story will be divided into sections and each chapter will focus on certain elements of the narrative. They will be treated in the following order: (1) how a story begins; (2) the narrator's role and characterization; (3) events and the use of time; (4) repetition; (5) gaps; and (6) how a story ends.

A detailed treatment of each of these elements for each section of the story is not possible here. A particular aspect of narrative criticism is the focus of each chapter, but other aspects that are more fully discussed in other chapters are regularly mentioned and considered. Another way of saying this is that there is an adaptable and interchangeable dimension to the relationships among the chapters. For example, the episode in which the master's wife attempts to seduce Joseph (Chapter Two) is analyzed from the point of view of the narrator's role and characterization, while the description of Joseph's time in prison (Chapter Three) focuses on events and the use of time. The reader is encouraged to reverse the two and apply to one section of the story the methodological principles discussed in the treatment of the other. How does the narrator function in the prison scene? How is time presented in the seduction scene? This kind of approach to the material will allow the reader to gain some practical experience of how narrative criticism works and should lead to some interesting results and fascinating classroom discussion.

By singling out narrative criticism and using it exclusively in this study of the Joseph story, I do not want to give the impression that I think the historical-critical method is unnecessary or irrelevant. Just the opposite is the case. In my view that approach has proved to be an extremely valuable tool in the task of analyzing biblical material and it will continue to make important contributions to the field. But it is only one of several tools, each of which approaches the text in a unique way by asking a different set of questions. In this book we will be asking the questions that narrative criticism brings to a text, but they are not the only questions worth asking. Sometimes they are not even the first or most important questions we should ask. For the study of a body of literature that is as diverse and complex as the Bible multiple approaches are needed. The reader who is able to study the text from different perspectives is in a better position to appreciate that richness and complexity.

The relationship between Genesis 38 and the rest of the Joseph story is a notoriously difficult issue to resolve. After the description of Joseph being sold into Egypt by his brothers in chapter 37 there is an abrupt shift to a story about Judah (one of Joseph's brothers) and an improper relationship he has with his daughter-in-law Tamar. Chapter 39 then resumes the Joseph story and opens by repeating the statement found at the end of chapter 37 that he was sold to an Egyptian official named Potiphar. Scholars have disagreed about the connection between the Joseph story and the interlude involving Judah and Tamar. Some see it as an insertion that intrudes and has very little to do with the Joseph story as a whole. Others have maintained that there are a number of thematic and vocabulary links between the two that suggest the Judah/Tamar episode is, in fact, an integral part of the story of Joseph.

In this book the former view will be followed for a couple of reasons. In the first place, the Judah/Tamar material disrupts the flow of the Joseph story despite the presence of elements that are echoed elsewhere in Genesis 37–50. Our analysis will employ the tools of narrative criticism to analyze the Joseph story and there is no reason to treat material that does not advance or contribute to that story in any substantive way. The chapter dealing with Judah and Tamar is a fascinating narrative that deserves careful study, but its relevance for our purposes is minimal. A second reason why we will not be considering Genesis 38 is that it has no counterpart in the Qur'an and therefore cannot be the subject of a comparative analysis. The lack of a parallel story in the other text does not automatically exclude a consideration of it. In fact, we will see that the Qur'an, too, contains a scene that is unique to it, and it will be discussed in some detail in Chapter Two. But when we compare it to the Judah/Tamar material we can see an important difference. The story of the dinner party that the wife of Joseph's master has for the women of the city is well integrated into the Qur'an's version of the story and it has a significant bearing on how the plot develops. It therefore deserves scrutiny in a way that the Judah/Tamar story does not.

The translation of the biblical text used throughout the book is that of the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). The translation of the Qur'an's Joseph story is my own, and a few brief comments about it are in order. Arabic, like Hebrew, is a highly gendered language in which the grammatical distinction between masculine and feminine is apparent in words other

than nouns and pronouns. This is different from a language like English where, for example, the verb "speaks" remains gender free until a subject is attached to it. In Arabic there are two separate forms of the verb depending on whether the one doing the speaking is male or female. In the Qur'an all words that refer to or describe Allah are masculine in gender, and I have translated them into English accordingly in order to give the reader as accurate and literal a sense of the text as possible. But this should not lead to the mistaken assumption that Muslims envision the deity as a male. As an aniconic religion, Islam forbids any attempt to depict or visually represent Allah. To do so would be to engage in *shirk*, or association, the worst sin a person can commit and the only offense that cannot be forgiven. To ascribe a human trait like maleness to Allah would be an example of this because it would associate a quality from the created world with the uncreated divine nature and therefore limit it. According to traditional Muslim belief, the deity is completely transcendent and unknowable to human beings. As is commonly the case with other languages, the limitations of certain features of Arabic, in this case its use of gender, often make it ill-equipped to communicate the subtleties and nuances of theological belief.

When comparing the accounts of the Joseph story in the Bible and the Qur'an I have followed the practice of referring to the deity as "Allah" when discussing the Islamic text and as "God" when treating Genesis. By doing so I am not implying that the two terms refer to separate and distinct deities. The Qur'an and Muslim faith insist that the God of Islam is the God of the Bible, and I do not mean to challenge or undermine that belief. The terms are used in order to help avoid confusion on the reader's part: this terminology distinguishes between the two texts so that they can be more easily and accurately compared.

Reading a text in translation is always fraught with problems. It is very much an experience of "being on the outside, looking in" because a translation, no matter how good, is never able to capture the total essence of the original. There is a definite truth in the old adage that something is always lost in a translation. When it comes to the Qur'an, the first thing that is usually lost is one of the text's most distinctive features, its poetry. This typically takes the form of a rhyming pattern in which the last word of each verse ends with the same or a similar sound. In the Joseph story this effect is realized by ending almost every verse with the letter *m* or *n* preceded by a long vowel. The result is a string of some one hundred verses that conclude in a similar way with the most common endings being *-ūn*, *-īn*, and *-īm*, a pattern that cannot be duplicated in translation. The Qur'an's Joseph story therefore has a poetic and sonorous quality that is particularly evident when the text is chanted by someone trained in the art of Qur'an recitation.

The poetic dimension of the text does not mean we should set aside the tools of narrative criticism to study it. This is clearly a story, albeit one that rhymes in its original language, and it is perfectly appropriate to analyze it as such by making use of the best methods at our disposal. This is also an approach that has won favor within the Islamic community. In recent times a number of Muslim scholars have studied the Qur'an's Joseph story as narrative; some examples of these efforts are listed in the bibliography.

The same disclaimer I put forth earlier when discussing the Qur'an applies here. This book is not meant to offer a comprehensive treatment of narrative criticism. It is an attempt to introduce the reader to the method and the potential it has to facilitate our understanding of stories like that of Joseph. The essentials of narrative criticism are covered, but much more could be said about them as well as about other aspects of the approach. Several very fine works that give a more detailed presentation of the method are available and they, too, are listed in the bibliography.

Joseph Meets Joseph: Rhetorical Criticism

A comparative analysis of the Joseph story in the Qur'an and the Bible that is informed by narrative criticism allows us to come to a fuller understanding of the rhetorical dimension of the two texts. Many authors write with a desire to do more than simply entertain or communicate information to their audience. They often attempt to influence their readers by convincing them to think a particular way after having read their work. For example, it could be that the author wishes to alter the reader's view of some important individual or event. Or it might be that the author wants the reader to change his or her opinion about some topic.

Rhetorical criticism studies how authors attempt to persuade their readers. The different ways authors go about this task can be easily illustrated by picking up a newspaper and comparing the front page to the editorial page. At first glance the front page appears to be nothing but a set of articles that simply communicate the nuts and bolts of stories without any explicit attempt to influence the reader's perception of what happened. But that is not the case at all. Each article is the result of conscious decisions by the author regarding what gets reported, how it gets reported, and what gets left out of the story. Each of these decisions has an impact on the reader's perception of and reaction to the article, but it is easy for this aspect of the story to escape our notice since it is presented as "objective reporting."

When you open up the editorial page it is impossible to miss the hand and the agenda of the writer. Here is where the author shares his or her opinion and attempts to convince the readers that they should be of the

same mind. The writer says, "here's what I think, and if you have any brains at all you'll think the same way." It is a much more overt and blatant form of persuasion than what is found on page one.

Stories of a religious nature like those found in the Bible and the Qur'an usually attempt to persuade their readers, but the form this takes is often closer to that of the front page than it is to the editorial page. There is no denying the fact that parts of the Bible and the Qur'an read like the most aggressively opinionated editorials, but the narratives in the books tend to exhibit a subtler rhetoric that is less pronounced. The Joseph story is a case in point. Although its attempts to influence the reader are sometimes apparent, more often than not they are less obvious and can easily escape detection. Only careful analysis that pays attention to the clues can allow us to get a sense of the author's rhetorical intent.

A comparative approach that adopts the method of narrative criticism is an excellent way to achieve this goal. When the differences between the two versions are noted and studied, the agenda and focus of each becomes clear. In effect, we can more easily see what it is that the author wants us to think about the events and characters of the story. In the same way, the tools of narrative criticism enable us to understand how each story makes use of the conventions of storytelling in its effort to persuade the reader.

Many others have written on the Joseph story in both the Bible and the Qur'an, and some of the most relevant works can be found in the list of suggested readings. I have learned a great deal from consulting these writings, but I have avoided direct reference to them throughout the course of this book. The primary reason for this decision is that I want to keep the focus squarely on a comparative study of the two texts, an approach that has rarely been attempted. The works cited in the bibliography provide excellent background to the material we will study and the methods we will employ, but none of them puts the Bible and the Qur'an in conversation with each other in a prolonged and detailed way. We will listen in on that conversation in order to see what happens in the encounter between Joseph and Joseph.

To put the matter another way, this book takes quite literally the title of the series to which it belongs: here Joseph "interfaces" with Joseph. His biblical self is put in dialogue with his Qur'anic self and we attempt to monitor the exchange. The same might be said of all the other characters in the story. His father, his brothers, his master's wife, the other prisoners, and Pharaoh all have Islamic counterparts who are similar to, but different from, those found in Genesis. They, too, will interface and the results will often be surprising. But perhaps the most surprising outcome will be the reader's realization that, just as with skinning cats, there's more than one way to tell a story and both are worth reading.

CHAPTER TWO

The Narrator and Characters: Joseph and Potiphar's Wife (Genesis 39:1-19; Qur'an 12:21-34)

The Bible and the Qur'an both report that Joseph is rescued from the well by a group of travelers and ends up in Egypt where he becomes part of the household of a man whose wife unsuccessfully attempts to seduce him. This is one of the most famous scenes of the entire Joseph story, and it has been the subject of countless works of art in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is a well-written narrative of sexual intrigue that addresses issues like unfulfilled desire, revenge, and moral responsibility, themes that have spoken to people for ages.

Our analysis of this section is mainly interested in how the information contained in the story is communicated to the reader. What role does the narrator play? Does the reader learn about the characters through their own words and actions, or through some other means? How is time presented and manipulated in the text? Attention to these and related issues can teach us a great deal about how a text is constructed and how it attempts to persuade its readers to accept its version of the events.

The attempted seduction is the focal point of the narrative for both the Qur'an and the Bible. But before describing that encounter each text presents some background information that exerts influence on how the reader will evaluate the characters. We will examine these two sections separately, but first some comments on how stories are organized and structured are in order.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle was the first person to engage in critical study of literary works, and he determined that plots are composed of three parts: a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning, or exposition, presents the background information of the story that helps to establish the context of the narrative for the reader. The end is the conclusion of the story describing the situation after the events of the narrative have taken

place. The middle section is where most of the action of the plot usually occurs. This section is typically divided into three subsections. The first is the complication that introduces some element into the story that will lead to a crisis for one or more of the characters. The second is the change that is brought about as a result of this complication. This can be an external change of situation in which the circumstances of the character(s) have been altered in some way, or it can be an internal change of knowledge whereby the character(s) now know(s) something previously unknown. The third subsection is the resolution or unraveling, in which the results of the change are made apparent to the reader.

It is common to speak of a book or a story as having a single plot, but if we apply this framework to most narratives it is apparent that, in fact, they usually contain a number of sequential or interrelated plots. This will become clear when we think of the first section of the Joseph story that was treated in the previous chapter. Within the context of the Joseph story as a whole it functions as the exposition, since it introduces some of the major characters and explains how Joseph ends up in Egypt, where most of the remainder of the narrative will take place. But if we think of it as an independent unit it is an entire plot unto itself, since it has its own complication, change, and resolution.

In addition, we can often identify more than one of each of these elements in a given story. For example, where do we locate the change in Genesis 37? Joseph goes through a significant change of situation when his brothers throw him into the well. But Jacob also experiences a change of knowledge when he receives the false word that Joseph has been killed. While the change Joseph undergoes might be more significant in terms of the overall story of Genesis 37–50, that of Jacob also plays an important role as the narrative unfolds. We should therefore keep in mind that narratives like the Joseph story are often composed of discrete subunits that contribute to the overall organization of the larger plot but can also be studied as separate literary entities in their own right. The structure of the section we now turn to is a case in point.

Prelude to a Kiss (Genesis 39:1-6; Qur'an 12:21-22)

As noted above, before describing the attempted seduction the Bible and the Qur'an provide the reader with some background information. In the biblical text this material is found in Genesis 39:1-6.

> [1]Now Joseph was taken down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. [2]The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man; he was in the house of his Egyptian master. [3]His master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hands. [4]So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him; he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. [5]From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and field. [6]So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge; and, with him there, he had no concern for anything but the food that he ate. Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking.

Taken on their own, these six verses are an independent narrative unit since they tell a story and contain the basic elements of a plot. They describe Joseph's arrival in Egypt, his entry into his master's house, and the subsequent success he and his master both enjoy as a result of his presence there. Viewed in a broader context these verses also function as the exposition or first part of the story that follows, recounting the attempted seduction by Potiphar's wife. They explain how Joseph found himself in a position of authority and trust that would enable him to be alone with the woman.

The reference to Joseph's good looks in the last sentence of the section makes the connection with the following story particularly clear. Biblical narrative rarely comments on the physical features of characters, but when it does so those physical qualities usually play an important role in the story. In this case the mention that Joseph is handsome helps to explain why his master's wife is attracted to him. An interesting feature of this section is that it comes entirely from the narrator. With rare exceptions, in biblical literature the narrator is always an omniscient, third-person voice who is not a character in the story. To say that the narrator is omniscient is not to say that the narrator reports everything. Certain things are reported, but others are left unexpressed, and it is the author who determines what the narrator divulges and what is left out. As we will see, the choice is a critical one because it has a significant effect on the reader's experience of the text. In the Bible the narrator's voice is always a reliable one that can be trusted and accepted as true. If the narrator does not provide information, or if the reader gains knowledge from another less reliable source, this leads to gaps and ambiguities in the text that can raise questions in the reader's mind. These issues will be treated in later chapters.

The method of characterization used in a text is a significant component that is easy to overlook. If the reader is told something about a character, this is called direct characterization. When it comes from the biblical

narrator the reader should accept the information as accurate and correct. But when it comes from somewhere else, such as another character, the reader must exercise caution since, for a variety of reasons, characters do not always speak the truth. This difference can be illustrated by comparing two verses in Genesis 37. Jacob's words in v. 33 of that chapter are an example of direct characterization by another character. "A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces." Jacob's characterization of Joseph as dead is erroneous because his other sons have deceived him into thinking this is so. But when the narrator describes Joseph's fate five verses earlier there is no doubt in the reader's mind that this is precisely what has happened to him. "When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt."

Another method commonly employed in narrative is indirect characterization. Here the reader is not given direct, explicit information about a character but instead attempts to form an impression about that character through a consideration of his or her actions and words in the narrative. This often leads to ambiguous and unclear conclusions. A character's behavior and speech can be hard to interpret because the reader is not always privy to his or her motivations and thoughts. Occasionally, though, more certainty is possible. For example, sometimes the conclusions one draws from indirect characterization can be verified by what is reliably known through direct characterization on the part of the narrator.

Returning to Genesis 37, we can see this principle in operation. In v. 22 Reuben attempts to dissuade his brothers from killing Joseph by offering them another option. "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him." These words shed indirect light on Reuben's character, but the reader has no way of knowing precisely what they say about him. What is his motivation for trying to spare Joseph? Do his words suggest the reader should evaluate his character positively, or does he have some sinister alternative plan for his brother? The narrator's direct characterization follows immediately in the second half of the verse and suggests the reader should adopt a more positive view of Reuben because he said this "that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to their father."

Because Gen 39:1-6 comes from the narrator, the reader accepts the information it contains as reliable and trustworthy. The narrator directly characterizes Joseph and his master, and there is no reason to doubt what is learned: Joseph became successful and his success rubbed off on his master. The narrator also explains the reason for their success and introduces a theological element into the text. Joseph and his master have prospered

because the Lord is with Joseph. This point is made through the use of repetition, a standard literary device often found in the Bible that will be discussed in detail in a later chapter. In order to call attention to some aspect of a story or to stress its importance, biblical writers often repeat it throughout the course of a text. In these six verses "the Lord" is mentioned five times, which is a high concentration of a term in a relatively brief section. The reader discovers that God is with Joseph (v. 2), his master knows God is with him (v. 3), God is the cause of Joseph's success (v. 3), and God has blessed the Egyptian's house and possessions (v. 5). Because the narrator is the source of this information it is accepted as accurate and true.

The theological focus of this section is in marked contrast to what was seen in ch. 37, where God is never mentioned. When Joseph is abandoned in the well by his brothers, the reader wonders where God is. But upon his arrival in Egypt the matter is not in doubt since the reader learns immediately that the Lord is actively present in his life. This information would not be as readily accepted if it had come from some other source, such as another character in the narrative.

As mentioned above, the narrator is omniscient but does not reveal everything. In these verses the reader learns that the Lord is with Joseph and that Potiphar recognizes it, but is left in the dark about another matter of some importance. Does Joseph know the Lord is with him? The narrator never says this explicitly, so the reader is left to wonder about Joseph's character and the extent of his knowledge. The question of Joseph's knowledge of God is an issue that we will be tracking regularly, particularly when we engage in comparative study of the Genesis and Qur'an texts.

A final aspect of the biblical text to consider before turning to its parallel in the Qur'an is its use of time. In literary study a distinction is often made between narrated time and narration time. Put simply, narrated time is the amount of time that passes in the world of a story, while narration time is the amount of time it takes to read the story. This can be illustrated by considering the episode in Gen 37:15-17 in which Joseph encounters the man who tells him his brothers left Shechem and went to Dothan. The end of that text says: "So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan." Dothan is about ten miles from Shechem and, under the best of circumstances, it would take some three to four hours to cover that distance. This is the narrated time of the text. But the duration of Joseph's journey is treated in a mere eleven words, only six in the original Hebrew text. The narration time, the time it takes to read those words, is only a few seconds.

Narrative time and narrated time often differ considerably, due to the use of expressions such as "after a while" and "the next week" that compress extended periods of time. Similarly, a lengthy physical description of a scene

can sometimes stretch on for a longer period of time than the events that are being narrated. The two are closest when dialogue is reported, since it takes the reader about the same amount of time to read the words as it does for the character to say them. The author's manipulation of time in a narrative can sometimes have a dramatic effect on how the reader experiences a story.

There are no chronological indicators in Gen 39:1-6, so it is very difficult for the reader to determine how much time passes between v. 1 and v. 6. The only thing that can be said with certainty is that the narrated time is longer than narration time. But we have no way of knowing things like how long it took for Joseph to arrive in Egypt or for Potiphar to see that the Lord was with him. The only clue the text provides that suggests it covers a fairly lengthy period of time is the reference to the master's field being blessed in v. 5, indicating the completion of at least one agricultural season. This lack of attention to matters of time is probably due to the function of this section of the story. Because it is the exposition to the "main event," the attempted seduction, the author is primarily interested in setting the context for what will happen by giving the reader the information necessary to understand the scene that is about to be related. Relatively insignificant matters like time indicators that do not serve that purpose are therefore irrelevant and unnecessary.

As is often the case, the Qur'an's parallel to this material is briefer, covering in only two verses what Genesis describes in six.

> 21The Egyptian who bought him said to his wife, "Treat him well during his lodging. Perhaps he will be of benefit to us and we will take him as a son." Thus did We establish Joseph in the land and We taught him the interpretation of events. Allah controlled his affairs although most people do not know. 22When he reached maturity We gave him wisdom and knowledge. Thus do We reward those who are good.

Unlike its counterpart in Genesis, this text does not come entirely from the narrator. Joseph's master speaks in v. 21, and his words provide some important information. First of all, the reader learns at the outset that the man is married, a fact that is not revealed until the seventh verse of the section in the Bible. This information is withheld in Genesis in order to realize a certain dramatic effect. The news that Potiphar has a wife is delayed until after the mention of Joseph's good looks, and she is introduced in a way that causes the reader to suspect trouble is around the corner. "Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking. And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph." The reader's suspicions are confirmed by the very next words in the text: "And (she) said, 'Lie with me.'"

In its own way the Qur'an text also anticipates the attempted seduction, only in a more subtle fashion. The master's request that his wife treat Joseph well during his stay with them raises a question in the reader's mind about her character (why would she need to be told this?), and it prefigures future events when she will not follow this advice, but will mistreat Joseph.

Another interesting piece of information that is disclosed by the master's words concerns Joseph's age at this point in the narrative. He entertains the possibility that he and his wife might take Joseph as a son, thereby indicating that Joseph is probably a bit younger than his seventeen-year-old biblical counterpart (Gen 37:2). This might also suggest that the wife is significantly older than Joseph, an element that adds a twist to the upcoming seduction scene.

Except for this one line of dialogue from the master, it is the narrator who speaks throughout these two verses in the Qur'an. But the source of that narratorial voice differs significantly in the two texts. Whereas the biblical narrator is anonymous and unknown, the identity of the narrator of Islam's scripture is never in doubt. This is the voice of Allah, who, according to Muslim belief, communicated the contents of the book directly to the prophet Muhammad through the agency of the angel Gabriel. This means that the narrator of the Qur'an enjoys a position of privilege that is unavailable to the biblical one. The distinction between deity and narrator typical of the Bible is not found in the Islamic text, where the two are identical. There is therefore a theological reason why the reader of the Qur'an should accept the narrator's voice as omniscient and reliable.

As was the case with the Genesis account, it is difficult to get an accurate sense of the narrated time of this passage. Verse 22 makes reference to Allah's gift of wisdom and knowledge to Joseph "when he reached maturity," but when exactly was this in relation to the point at which the Egyptian brought him into his house? Similarly, it is unclear whether the expressions of divine favor directed toward Joseph should be understood as occurring sequentially over a period of time or if he received them all at once. In other words, did Allah establish Joseph, teach him, control his affairs, and give him wisdom and knowledge all at once, or did these things occur over time? Once again this lack of concern for precise chronology can be explained by recognizing the function these verses serve in the larger narrative. Like the biblical version, the Qur'an is primarily interested in providing the reader with the information necessary to properly interpret and understand the upcoming seduction scene. Anything not serving that purpose is unnecessary.

Here, as in Genesis, that background information is mostly theological in nature. The text goes to significant lengths to explain all Allah has done for Joseph: his position in the land, his ability to interpret events, his

well-controlled affairs, and his wisdom and knowledge are all the result of divine largesse. The reference to interpretation of events is noteworthy because this same phrase is found on Jacob's lips in v. 6 of the Qur'an passage. After he advises Joseph not to tell his brothers of his vision Jacob predicts what Allah will do for Joseph in the future; this includes teaching him how to interpret events. The words in the Arabic text are identical in the two verses, and so the reader hears from the divine narrator that the very thing Jacob envisioned has come to pass. This validates the close relationship with the deity that Jacob appeared to have in the previous section of the Qur'an story and establishes him as a credible character in the reader's mind. This is another example of how repetition can function as a literary device that influences the reading experience.

A key difference between the Genesis and Qur'an versions is found in the last sentence of v. 21: "Allah controlled his affairs although most people do not know." This statement asserts that the majority of people are unaware of the role that Allah plays in Joseph's life, a situation unlike that found in Gen 39:1-6. We noted that in the biblical narrative his master, in particular, is conscious of what God has done for Joseph, and that this is the main reason why the Egyptian is able to prosper. Whereas the Qur'an text calls attention to people's ignorance about Joseph's relationship with God, the Genesis story highlights the fact that it is known and recognized by others. This is an important aspect of the narratives that will be discussed in several places in the coming chapters.

Our comparison of how the two texts present the introductory material before the attempted seduction sheds light on their agendas. We learn a great deal about Joseph in both books and much of that knowledge is theological in nature since each version calls attention to what God has done for him. In fact, the Qur'an focuses almost entirely on Joseph's relationship with the deity. The only reference to Joseph in relation to other human characters is found in the first half of v. 21 when the master instructs his wife to treat Joseph well and suggests that they might take him as a son. But there is no description of Joseph interacting with or speaking with them or any other person. The rest of the section deals exclusively with Joseph's relationship with Allah.

The Genesis account, on the other hand, puts more emphasis on the relationship between Joseph and Potiphar. It adopts the opposite order of the Qur'an and presents first the fact that the Lord is with Joseph (39:2a). It then offers a fairly lengthy description of the effect this has on Joseph's relationship with his master (39:2a-6a). Joseph's presence in his master's house, the favor he finds in his sight, his position as overseer, and the trust he inspires in his master are all elements of the Bible's telling of the story

that are not present in the Qur'an. They give the reader a fairly detailed picture of the relationship that exists between Joseph and Potiphar that is unavailable to the reader of the Qur'an.

At this point in the narrative the Joseph of the Qur'an has a more developed relationship with God than his biblical counterpart does. This is something that will be apparent in the seduction scene and elsewhere throughout the story. The foundation of that relationship is presented here in clear and exact language: Allah establishes him in the land, teaches him the interpretation of events, controls his affairs, and rewards him with wisdom and knowledge. The only thing the Genesis reader knows is that the Lord is "with Joseph," a phrase that indicates divine presence but lacks any specificity. In fact, the same might be said about Potiphar: The Lord is also "with him" since his house and possessions have been blessed. The Islamic text, on the other hand, sets Joseph apart from others by calling attention to what is distinct in his relationship with Allah.

The Qur'an's emphasis on Allah's role as guide and protector for Joseph is perhaps best seen in the divine gifts of wisdom and knowledge he receives. In the previous chapter we noted that true wisdom and knowledge reside only with Allah. In v. 6 Jacob refers to Allah as "the one who knows, the wise one." The deity is now equipping Joseph with the tools necessary to live a good and proper life. Interestingly, the Bible also calls attention to two traits Joseph possesses, but this time they are physical qualities: he is handsome and good-looking. These, too, may have their source in God, but they do not prepare Joseph as well for the challenges he will face. In fact, they appear to be an obstacle to his living a good and proper life. His wisdom and knowledge will allow him to overcome the advances of his master's wife in the Qur'an, but his physical attributes are the reason why she attempts to seduce him in Genesis.

She Said, He Said (Genesis 39:7-19; Qur'an 12:23-29)

The scene of the attempted seduction offers an excellent opportunity to explore the area of characterization. The Bible and the Qur'an both present it as an episode full of dramatic tension in which the characters are richly drawn, and the reader is inevitably drawn into their world as the story unfolds. The Qur'an's version is found in 12:23-29.

> [23]But the woman in whose house he was living tried to entice him. She locked the doors and said, "Come here." He responded, "Allah forbid! My master has made well my lodging. Evildoers do not prosper." [24]She desired him and he would have desired her if not for the clear proof of

his Lord. Thus, We turned back evil and immorality from him. Truly, he is one of Our sincere servants. [25]They ran to the door and she ripped his shirt from behind. They met her husband at the door. She said, "There is no penalty for a man who desires to do evil to your family other than imprisonment or painful punishment." [26]He responded, "She tried to entice me!" A witness from her family testified, "If his shirt is torn in the front, she is telling the truth and he is a liar. [27]But if his shirt is torn from behind, then she is lying and he is truthful." [28]When he saw that his shirt was torn from behind he said, "This is one of your plots. Truly, your plots are great. [29]Ignore this, Joseph. You, woman, ask forgiveness for your offense. Truly, you are a sinner."

Obviously the wife does not follow the advice her husband gave her in v. 21 when he urged her to treat Joseph well during his stay with them. She does just the opposite by first trying to lure him into an inappropriate sexual relationship and then placing the blame on Joseph when her husband unexpectedly arrives on the scene. The intensity of her attraction to Joseph is reflected in her actions. She locks the doors to the room they are in and runs after him when he tries to escape, ripping the shirt off his back in the process. The narrator affirms this impression of the wife by directly characterizing her as "desiring him" (v. 24).

When she locks the doors the wife expresses a degree of premeditation that indicates the attempted seduction is not a spur-of-the-moment show of passion. But the motivation behind the act is ambiguous. Does she lock the doors because she does not want someone to barge into the room and find them in a compromising situation? Does she lock them because she wants to prevent Joseph from fleeing her presence? Or does she lock them because both of these scenarios are possible in her mind? If these questions could be answered with certainty it would result in an indirect characterization of Joseph on her part that would give the reader a sense of what she thinks of his character. If she locked the doors to prevent someone on the outside from intruding, it would suggest she thinks that Joseph will be a willing partner in the affair. On the other hand, if she locked the doors to keep him in, she probably believes he is not going to cooperate and will need to be coerced. The ambiguity cannot be resolved, but, as is usually the case, it adds an intriguing dimension to the wife's character that complicates the reader's evaluation of her.

If the doors had not been locked Joseph would have been long gone. The Qur'an paints him as a character who is above reproach and able to withstand the temptation of his master's wife. His words tell us as much. "Allah forbid! My master has made well my lodging. Evildoers do not

prosper." His act of running to the door is in keeping with the message of his words. In addition to the testimony of Joseph himself, the narrator weighs in with some direct characterization that continues the theme begun in vv. 21b and 22 when the narratorial voice was first heard. "She desired him and he would have desired her if not for the clear proof of his Lord. Thus, We turned back evil and immorality from him. Truly, he is one of Our sincere servants."

These words call attention both to Joseph's special relationship with Allah and to his humanity. Ultimately it is Allah who makes Joseph a good and moral person. This may be an oblique reference to the wisdom and knowledge the deity has given him (v. 22), enabling him to fend off the advances of his master's wife. The comment that Joseph would have otherwise desired her is an explicit recognition of his human nature. According to Islamic belief all human beings, including prophets like Joseph, are susceptible to temptation and have the capacity to sin. The mercy and grace of Allah, along with a desire to follow the divine will, are what enable one to stay on the straight path. Those who do so are worthy of the title bestowed on Joseph: "one of Our sincere servants."

This is an interesting title in light of the content of the narrative. The story recounts Joseph's experiences as a servant in the Egyptian's house, but the narrator reminds the reader that this is not the true nature of Joseph's servanthood. He is first and foremost a servant of Allah, the only true master. This, in turn, introduces a degree of ambiguity into Joseph's words. When he deflects the woman's come-on with the comment that his master has made well his lodging, which master does Joseph have in mind?

Several clues in the text suggest that Joseph is speaking of Allah when he refers to his master in v. 23. First of all, the comment is preceded by the exclamation "Allah forbid!" The reference to "my master" immediately after this could be an example of apposition, a grammatical term that refers to the use of two different words or titles to refer to the same individual. In the present case Joseph may be making use of apposition by identifying the deity as both "Allah" and "my master." Another clue can be seen in Allah's designation of Joseph as "one of Our servants" in v. 24. This may be a way of picking up on the theme that Joseph has introduced and stating that Allah is, in fact, the master of whom he speaks in v. 23.

Yet another argument for seeing Allah as Joseph's master in v. 23 is one that is based on linguistic and contextual grounds. When Joseph says that his master has "made well my lodging" his words recall the Egyptian's request to his wife that she "treat him (Joseph) well during his lodging" in v. 21. In fact, the Arabic term "lodging" (*maṯwā*) is identical in both. In the intervening v. 22 the narrator tells the reader that Allah, not his human

master, is the one who has established Joseph in the land and controlled his affairs. Joseph, too, is aware of this since he possesses wisdom and knowledge given to him by Allah. It is therefore logical to conclude that the master he mentions in v. 23 can only be Allah, who has truly made well his lodging.

This conclusion is further supported by the fact that when Allah is referred to as Joseph's Lord earlier in v. 24 the Arabic term that is used *(rabb)* is the same one that is translated as "master" in v. 23. In fact, in the entire Qur'an story the Egyptian in whose house he is living is never called Joseph's *rabb*. Only Allah is given this title in relation to Joseph, and this argues in favor of understanding it this way in v. 23 as well.

Even if Joseph is speaking of Allah as his master, this may not be what the wife is hearing. The text does not indicate that she is aware of the information the narrator has just imparted to the reader, so she may be totally ignorant of the relationship Joseph has with Allah. She may be assuming that he is referring to her husband, and so it would be a mistake to interpret her persistence in going after Joseph as somehow a rejection of his faith in Allah. Once again, the ambiguity that pervades the scene complicates how the reader should interpret it.

A final aspect of Joseph's character that deserves brief comment is the fact that he attempts to defend himself after he is falsely accused. His denial of any wrongdoing in v. 26 reflects his sense of justice and relates back to his remark to the woman in v. 23 that evildoers do not prosper. If he does not speak up now she will be off the hook, and that principle will have been violated. His claim of innocence is also a key element in the narrative, because without it the witness might not have stepped forward and suggested the test that absolved Joseph of guilt.

The husband does not play a very prominent role in the seduction scene, but his character is used to great effect. His arrival just at the moment they race to the door is a dramatic high point that leaves the reader guessing what his response will be. But the man does not speak. He will not utter a word until every other character in the story says something. His wife goes first and, displaying an impressive ability to think on her feet, shifts the blame to Joseph. This leads to Joseph's profession of innocence, setting up a classic case of "she said, he said." The reader continues to wonder what the husband will do.

Before that question can be answered, the witness comes forward and proposes a way of getting at the truth. Only at this point does the husband speak and reveal his reaction to the circumstances. Delaying the husband's response by having the other characters speak first is a very effective technique that prolongs the narrative and pulls the reader into the world of the

story. It resolves the complication of the plot in a more memorable and satisfying way than if the man had observed the torn shirt on his own and immediately rendered his verdict.

A couple of things about the husband's response are noteworthy. First of all, the double reference to plots in v. 28 makes use of the same Arabic root *(kāda)* found twice in v. 5 when Jacob warned Joseph about the potential plotting of his brothers. The resumption of that theme here contributes to the image of Joseph as an innocent victim who needs to be cautious not only in his relationship with his brothers but with others who might wish to harm him.

When the husband speaks of "your plots" in this verse he is not only referring to his wife's plots, because the word "your" is in the feminine plural form. In effect he is saying that the plots of "you women" are great. This is an odd construction that, as we will see, is best understood in light of the Qur'an scene that follows and will be treated below.

The other striking aspect of the husband's comments in v. 29 is that they are loaded with theological language. The Arabic words translated here as "ask forgiveness" *(istaghfara)*, "offense" *(dhanb)*, and "sinner" *(khāṭi')* are all terms primarily used to describe violations of the divine will and the means by which one can overcome them in order to regain a proper relationship with God. This is an interesting element of the Egyptian's character because it indicates that he interprets his wife's actions as not only harmful to Joseph but somehow directed against Allah. In other words, he appears to be a man of faith who is concerned with the theological consequences of what she has done and is not simply thinking of the social ramifications.

The setting of a story is an important element that often helps to create a mood and shape the reading experience. In the seduction scene in the Qur'an the setting conveys a feeling of confinement that highlights Joseph's precarious situation and enables the reader to identify with him. The precise location of the scene is not given, but a sense of the enclosed space in which it occurs is conveyed through the triple mention of the door(s). Symbolically, the door represents a border that Joseph is not allowed to cross. When the woman locks it and makes his passage impossible, Joseph becomes a prisoner in her world, unable to escape. This sense of entrapment is heightened when he rushes to the door only to meet her husband, who is yet another potential barrier to his freedom.

No other details are provided for the setting. Where are they in the house? What is in the room? Which door do they run to? What time of day is it? Only the doors are mentioned, but they have a tremendous impact on the story. In fact, the lack of reference to other aspects of the setting makes the doors all the more prominent. They are the focus of attention and are

the dominant architectural and physical feature of the scene as the reader envisions it. Joseph is trapped in an enclosed space behind locked doors and cannot escape.

The Bible's description of the encounter between Joseph and Potiphar's wife is found in Gen 39:7-19:

> 7And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." 8But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Look, with me here, my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand. 9He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" 10And although she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not consent to lie beside her or to be with her. 11One day, however, when he went into the house to do his work, and while no one else was in the house, 12she caught hold of his garment, saying, "Lie with me!" But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside. 13When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled outside, 14she called out to the members of her household and said to them, "See, my husband has brought among us a Hebrew to insult us! He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice; 15and when he heard me raise my voice and cry out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside." 16Then she kept his garment by her until his master came home, 17and she told him the same story, saying, "The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to insult me; 18but as soon as I raised my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside." 19When his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, saying, "This is the way your servant treated me," he became enraged.

We have seen that when the wife locks the doors in the Qur'an it is an action that reflects a certain level of premeditation on her part. This aspect of her character is expanded in Genesis, where she is presented as a calculating woman who knows what she wants and will go to any lengths to get it. As far as the reader knows, the attempted seduction in the Islamic text is an isolated incident that could be the result of a moment of weakness when she finds herself in the rare situation of being alone with Joseph. This is not the case in the Bible since she continues to work on Joseph "day after day" (v. 10) despite the rebuff she receives after the first attempt. The events of the climactic scene that finds them together are the culmination of a prolonged and sustained effort on the woman's part to win over Joseph and not simply due to coincidence or the heat of the moment.

Her premeditation in Genesis extends beyond the attempted seduction. After Joseph flees and leaves her holding his clothing she has some time to think about what her next move will be. They have not been caught red-handed by her husband as in the Qur'an, and so she has the option to keep silent and let the matter drop. But she chooses not to follow this course. She keeps the garment and recruits members of her household as unwitting accomplices in the scheme she devises. Therefore her premeditation in Genesis is a factor not just in her attempts to entice Joseph but also in her response when he rebukes her efforts. A quality that is presented in a subtle and ambiguous way in the Qur'an is her defining trait in the Bible.

The time element is interesting in relation to the woman's premeditation. According to v. 26 she kept Joseph's garment by her "until his master came home." The reader has no way of knowing the narrated time involved in this statement. Did her husband come back later that day, or was he on an extended trip and did not return until much later? If the latter is the case, her inability to drop the matter would reflect the depth of her anger at Joseph and her desire for revenge. The question must remain unresolved since it is impossible to know how long she waited. But here is an example of how attention to the use of time in a narrative can have an impact on how the reader perceives a character.

The negative assessment of her character that the reader has begun to formulate is affirmed as the narrative unfolds. Feigning indignation, she implicates her husband and claims he is partially responsible for the humiliation she has had to endure. First she attempts to garner sympathy from the members of her household: "See, my husband has brought among us a Hebrew to insult us!" Then, when he returns home, she points an accusatory finger directly at her husband. "The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to insult me." In both places she calls attention to Joseph's Hebrew ancestry, thereby adding insult to injury by underscoring the fact that the man who has offended her is a foreigner. She also points to her husband's culpability in both lines by stating that he is the one responsible for bringing Joseph into the house in the first place.

A comparative analysis of how the wife is presented in the Bible and the Qur'an leads to interesting results. In both cases she attempts to seduce Joseph and deceive her husband, but the wife of the Qur'an fares better in the mind of the reader. In a sense she can be viewed as a victim of circumstances in the Islamic text. She gives in to her desire when she finds herself in the presence of a man she is attracted to, and is forced to lie to her husband when he arrives on the scene unexpectedly. She is a tragic and pathetic figure, literally chasing after the object of her affection and making up a story on the spot to avoid further embarrassment.

This is not the impression the Bible reader has of her. The wife in Genesis is a manipulative and vindictive person. Her attraction to Joseph borders on the obsessive and she refuses to take no for an answer. Unlike her Islamic counterpart who is caught in the act, she has time to think about her situation and is not forced to concoct a story on the fly. The woman in the Bible accuses Joseph because she has been spurned, not because she has been discovered. She also gets away with it. When the wife's lie is exposed in the Qur'an her husband asks her to admit her mistake and begin the process of rehabilitation. But when the biblical wife gets off scot-free the reader can only wonder what, or who, will catch her eye next time.

The heavy emphasis the Qur'an's version of the attempted seduction places on Joseph's relationship with Allah has already been noted. The narrator informs us that the deity is the primary reason why Joseph is able to fend off the woman's advances (v. 24), and Joseph himself appears to refer to Allah in v. 23 when he says his master has made well his lodging. In Genesis, on the other hand, Joseph's relationship with Potiphar, his earthly master, is the focus of attention. This is in keeping with the difference already observed regarding how the background material to the seduction is presented in the two books. In the Islamic text (vv. 21-22) Allah's presence in Joseph's life is the dominant theme. In Genesis (39:1-6), on the other hand, Joseph's relationship with God is presented within the context of his relationship with Potiphar.

Is the biblical Joseph able to avoid giving in to the woman because he receives God's assistance? The answer to that question is not as clear as in the Qur'an where Allah (the narrator) bluntly states that this is the case. In Genesis, God never explicitly claims to be the source of Joseph's resolve, and so the reader is left to wonder what role, if any, the deity plays in the scene. One might appeal to the opening verses of ch. 39 where it is stated that the Lord is with Joseph and then argue that the same is true in this scene, where the Lord continues to be with him as he is tempted by his master's wife. But this is to read between the lines in a way that is unnecessary in the Qur'an. A further argument against this approach is the fact that the background material in Gen 39:1-6 speaks only of the physical and tangible benefits Joseph receives from his Lord being with him, and does not mention how his moral character or disposition are affected by God's presence. There is, then, an ambiguity about the deity's relationship to Joseph in the biblical scene that is not found in the Qur'an.

This is not to say that the Genesis text is completely lacking theological content. In v. 9 Joseph interprets an affair with the woman as a "sin against God." But this acknowledgement only comes at the end of a fairly lengthy response to her invitation that is centered on his relationship with

Potiphar, not God. Joseph reminds her of the terms of the agreement between himself and her husband: his master has no concerns because he has placed everything in Joseph's hands. He then goes so far as to claim equality with Potiphar—"he is not greater in this house than I am"—except where his wife is concerned. Only after describing these ground rules does Joseph introduce a theological element and speak of a possible sin.

The difference between the two texts on this point is striking. The Qur'an's Joseph begins his refusal with the exclamation "Allah forbid!" and then he and the narrator focus on all that the deity has done for him. The theological consequences of the potential act are clearly to the fore: if Joseph sleeps with the woman his relationship with Allah will be damaged. The relationship he has with the woman's husband is not mentioned and never enters the picture. But in *his* response the Joseph of Genesis chooses to begin with and concentrate on his ties to Potiphar. He eventually gets around to mentioning that this would also be an offense to God, but when compared to his words in the Qur'an this comment almost sounds like an afterthought. It appears that his relationship with Potiphar is primary in the eyes of the biblical Joseph, and this lends his character an air of ambition, even selfishness, that his Islamic counterpart lacks. If the Joseph of the Qur'an gives in to her wishes he might lose his soul. If the Joseph in Genesis does, he might lose his job.

This impression is reinforced by a consideration of the vocabulary employed by the Genesis version. We have noted that the Qur'an leaves no doubt that Allah is Joseph's true master. In the Bible it is Potiphar who holds that title, as evidenced by the fact that the term "master" occurs five times (vv. 7, 8 [twice], 16, 19), all referring to the Egyptian. In each of those cases Potiphar is called either "his master" or "my master," underscoring the relational dimension of the term and defining Joseph's true identity. Although the husband is identified as Potiphar twice elsewhere in the biblical text (37:36; 39:1), his personal name is avoided here in favor of the title that asserts his authority over Joseph. A similar technique that makes the same point is employed with regard to Joseph when he is referred to in rapid succession as a "Hebrew" (v. 14), "the Hebrew servant" (v. 17), and "your servant" (v. 19).

Joseph is a servant in both texts, but he owes his allegiance to a different master in each. This has a profound impact on how the reader understands and evaluates his character in the two versions. The Islamic Joseph is a man of faith whose master is Allah and who considers a tryst with the woman to constitute a breach of that relationship. The biblical Joseph has his sights set on more mundane matters. He, too, is aware of the theological repercussions should he give in, but he is first and foremost the servant

of his human master and he frames the question with that relationship in mind. At this point the Bible reader is still not sure if Joseph even knows that the Lord, his other master, is with him.

Potiphar's character is totally unlike that of his counterpart in the Qur'an. He is present for all but the first two verses in the Islamic text and he plays a vital role in the plot. Each of the other characters speaks to him, and he pronounces the judgment that results in Joseph being exonerated and the woman chastised.[7] As the story unfolds it is as if the reader is experiencing the action from the husband's perspective as he first discovers his wife with Joseph, then weighs the information he receives from the two of them and the witness, and finally renders a verdict. Throughout the narrative the focus of attention is on the husband and what his reaction will be.

In Genesis, Potiphar plays a different role in the narrative. He is mentioned by both Joseph (39:8-9) and his wife (39:14), but he does not actually appear until the last few verses after all the action has taken place. No one but his wife speaks to him in Genesis and, in a striking departure from his character in the Qur'an, he never utters a single word in this scene or anywhere else in the Bible. This is primarily due to the fact that he does not return home until after the attempted seduction and he only hears his wife's version of the events. In the biblical text the reader's primary question is what the woman's reaction to the situation will be. As she sits at home, Joseph's garment nearby, she has a number of options. Will she hold her silence and let the episode die, or will she falsely accuse Joseph to her husband? Whereas the Potiphar of the Qur'an is presented as a round and fully developed character who must exercise his reason and make a decision, his biblical alter ego is flatter and more passive: he is the one to whom his wife's decision is communicated.

Although he does not speak, Genesis describes Potiphar's response to his wife's report through the narrator, who says he became enraged (39:19). She plays the role of an innocent victim in convincing fashion and her husband falls for it hook, line, and sinker. But his anger is a curious reaction in light of what the reader already knows about Potiphar and his relationship with Joseph. This is the same man who, according to the always reliable narrator, saw that the Lord was with Joseph and entrusted all that he had to him (39:2-6). Why does he now rush to judgment and not even give Joseph the opportunity to defend himself? This is a gap in the narrative that leaves the reader wondering, and it becomes particularly apparent when we compare the two versions and note that the Islamic Potiphar exhibits an ability to judge the situation and evaluate it theologically that he lacks in Genesis.

Although they are relatively minor characters, the members of the household in the Bible also deserve mention. Like Potiphar, they are not

physically present to witness what transpires between Joseph and the woman. Also like him, they get the wife's version of the events, thereby implicating Joseph and absolving her. Her reason for doing this is transparently obvious. When Joseph flees her presence she immediately summons them so that they will hear of it from her before Joseph can tell them what really happened. In this way the household members will be able to validate her story in the event that Potiphar should begin to ask them questions and inquire as to what they know.

She is not able to coach the household in the Qur'an. There one of them steps forward and proposes a way to get at the truth: if the shirt is torn from the back, the woman is guilty. The very group that is her ace up the sleeve in Genesis turns out to be the cause of her downfall in the Qur'an. This difference in how they are presented serves to put the woman in an even more negative light for the Bible reader. By getting to them before either Joseph or her husband can, she has succeeded in manipulating every other character in the narrative so that Joseph's guilt is a foregone conclusion.

The Guest of Honor (Qur'an 12:30-34)

The Qur'an's account of the attempted seduction has a brief sequel that recounts an unusual dinner party thrown by the wife.

> [30]The women in the city said, "The master's wife is trying to entice her young man. He has made her passionate. We think she is clearly in the wrong." [31]When she heard their comments, she sent to them and prepared a feast for them. She gave each one a knife and then said (to Joseph), "Come out to them!" When they saw him they exalted him and cut their hands saying, "Allah preserve us! This is no man—this is a noble angel!" [32]She said, "This is the one you blamed me for. I did try to entice him but he restrained himself. If he does not do what I order him to do he will be imprisoned and made worthless." [33]He said, "Oh Lord, I prefer prison to what they are asking me to do. Unless You turn back their plots from me, I will give in to them and become an unbeliever." [34]His Lord answered him and turned back their plots. Truly, He is the one who hears, the one who knows.

There is no parallel to this episode in Genesis, so it has no relevance for a comparative study of the Bible and the Qur'an. Nonetheless, there are a few things about this section of the Islamic text that warrant attention and consideration. First of all, while the story is not found in the Bible it is present in later Jewish literature. A number of different versions of the women's meal are found in rabbinic sources, and those texts share common

elements with the Qur'an's description of the gathering. For some scholars this phenomenon raises questions about sources and the possible influence of Jewish traditions on the Qur'an. This is an interesting and important issue, but it lies outside the scope of our study. Because we are employing the method and tools of narrative criticism we are concerned only with the text as we have it and not its prehistory or possible sources.

This brief addendum to the Qur'an seduction scene makes the wife both more sympathetic and more problematic for the reader. On the one hand, after being castigated as a sinner by her husband in the previous verse she is now further embarrassed by her friends, who mock her for having a crush on Joseph. She has become the laughingstock of her neighbors before she has had a chance to follow her husband's advice and admit her wrongdoing. This causes the reader to emotionally identify with her as a tragic figure who deserves some level of sympathy.

In the same way, the fact that all of these women are immediately attracted to Joseph serves to explain, if not excuse, why the wife attempted to entice him. He has the capacity to make women swoon, and the reader is left with the sense that many women would be tempted to do the same thing she did if given the opportunity.

Still, there are things about the woman that make her hard to like. Her demand that Joseph obey her and give in to her wishes (v. 32) indicates that she still has not learned her lesson after being caught and publicly exposed. In addition, she remains clueless about why Joseph was able to withstand her advances, and attributes it to his powers of self-control (v. 32). The reader knows that, in fact, Joseph's determination has a divine source since he would have given in if Allah had not come to his aid (v. 24). Ironically, the woman continues to remain unaware of that truth even as the deity answers Joseph's prayer for help in overcoming the group of women who now seek to seduce him (v. 34).

The dinner scene continues the theme of plotting that we have already identified elsewhere in the Qur'an's Joseph story. In v. 33 Joseph prays that Allah might turn back their plots, and this is precisely what happens in the next verse. The plural form "their plots" is found in both of these verses and recalls her husband's words to the woman in v. 28. In that earlier scene he used the second-person plural form "your plots" twice, and we noted that this is a curious mode of address since he is speaking only to his wife. In light of what takes place at the dinner party and the double reference to "their plots" there, it is best to see the husband's words as anticipating what will happen in the next scene when a group of women plot against Joseph.

The section ends by calling attention to Allah's ability to be aware of all that occurs: "Truly He is the one who hears, the one who knows." The

reference to Allah's knowledge continues a major motif of the Islamic story of Joseph. Just as the section treated in the previous chapter ended with a reference to the deity knowing what they did to Joseph (v. 19), this one concludes with another allusion to divine knowledge. In between, Allah grants Joseph wisdom and knowledge (v. 22), and intervenes in Joseph's affairs in a way that indicates the deity's awareness of what is happening to him.

The consistent presence of this theme in the Islamic text makes its relative absence in Genesis more obvious. God is mentioned for the first time in this part of the biblical Joseph story, but the divine character remains fairly flat and undeveloped. Apart from Joseph's comment about sinning against God in v. 9, the only other places where the deity is mentioned occur early in the chapter when it is said that God is with Joseph and is the reason for the success that both he and Potiphar experience. But what does God know? How exactly is God with Joseph? Does God intervene when Joseph is tempted? These are questions that are addressed in the Qur'an but left unanswered in Genesis.