CHAPTER IV

CONTEXT OF THE NARRATIVES: BIBLICAL, QURANIC AND POETICAL

When scholars investigate the apparent transmission of material from one monotheistic scripture to another, they tend to assume that earlier materials are normative and later ones derivative. This tendency, if not controlled, makes it difficult to appreciate either earlier or later materials in and of themselves; and it affects scholars' attitudes to the three scriptures.

A promising way to appreciate mechanisms of transmission studies is to be found in the analysis of narrative, or narratology. A narratological approach can elucidate "The Bible" the Qur'an and the poem so as to clarify the relationship of the three and the art of poetic narrative as well. The Surat Yusuf, the twelfth Qur'anic chapter, will serve as a specific example which has wider implications for the fields of history of religion and literary history as well.

Now a reader of this poem would have to be familiar with the Biblical version and the Qur'anic version in order to be able to understand the poem version fully but he must understand the nature of inter-textuality among these texts.

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1 It is only Genesis 37-46 that parallels the Qur'anic Joseph story. The Bible contains more about Joseph than does the Qur'an, which concerns itself only with Joseph in Egypt.
Both the OT and Qur'an make special claims for the narratives contained within their pages. Each insists that the reader accept the stories given there as the "original version" in the deepest sense. Stories which include this claim to authority must be interpreted differently from texts which make no such claim. The situation presented by three texts - the poem the Qur'an and Bible - of Joseph's story is especially complex, because all stories assume that the reader will accept their authority as given and final. Nevertheless, the situation is not "balanced", for the Qur'an recognizes the existence of other "versions" of its stories.

This leads the reader or the interpreter to view the relation between the OT, the Qur'an and the Poem as a case of one-sided dependence. This means that the interpreter of the poem, for example, has to know the Qur'anic story or the Biblical one in order to fully understand it.

On this principle, the poem's narrative depends on both the earlier texts, but primarily Qur'an. However, the author of the poem also appreciates the value of comparison in identifying the uniqueness of the Biblical and the Qur'anic versions:
Understanding of the Quranic or biblical story can of course be facilitated by comparing the three narratives with other stories which are based on them, or which have been viewed as "similar" to them in some respect. Such comparison can make the interpreter more aware of the unique traits of the poem by recognizing its differences from other "versions".

Such comparisons point to the uniqueness of each telling, a uniqueness that can be accounted for only through an internal analysis of each. There is not just the relationship of the version to original/ancestor, but one has to also take note of the strategies and constraints of each telling in its own large context(s).

The components of such an approach might be assembled from the work of folklorists, narratologists, and speech-act theorists, in Smith's view if a story is more basic than any other(s), Therefore; she argues that:

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

2. Among the narratives that can be constructed in response to a given narrative are not only those that we commonly refer to as "versions" of it

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(for example, translations, adaptations, abridgements, and paraphrases) but also those retellings that we call "plot summaries", "interpretations" and, sometimes, "basic stories". None of these retellings, however, is more absolutely basic than any of the others.

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

4. The form and features of any "version" of a narrative will be of particular motives that elicited it and the particular interests and functions it was designed to serve....

5. Among any array of narratives - tales or tellings - in the universe, there is an unlimited number of potentially perceptible relations. These relations may be of many different kinds and orders, including formal and thematic, synchronic and diachronic, and casual and non-casual. ..... Since new sets of interests can emerge at any time and do emerge continuously, there can be no ultimately basic set of relations among narratives, and thus also no "natural" genres of "essential" types, and
thus also no limit to the number or nature of narratives that may sometimes be seen as versions or variants of each other.3

As Smith has pointed out, the implications of these positions for reading and making sense of the poem's story of Joseph are far-reaching. For, there is never a single context in which a story can be heard or read or told. Stories always have plural contexts, even for a single hearer or reader. The perception of an affinity with other stories on the part of an individual or community arises out of their interests, as does their choice of criteria by which to determine affinity. Therefore, any given story can be at once part of many affinal groups, perceived as sets by different individuals or even by various individuals within the same community. Furthermore, when a story is perceived as "belonging" to a group of stories, it can affect the understanding of other stories in the group.

The Appendix will contain the three texts. In that appendix Joseph's story in the poem, in the Bible and in the Qur'an are "told". All tellings, constructed for the special needs of this analysis (especially to highlight similarities and differences), which is more coherent; basic than the other; and the Biblical one proves to be more detailed than the Qur'an, also the poem comes to mention incidents which are not found in both the Qur'an and the Bible.

3 Smith, "Narrative versions", pp. 221-22.
To view Joseph’s story in the poem as a more Qur'anic version, than the Biblical one is in itself a cultural decision and an essentially literary-historical one at that. Other motif - for example, rags-to-riches, sibling rivalry, Divinely-guided friend of God - multiply the affinities almost infinitely. The story is of temptation and intrigue as well as triumph for the friends of God and God's mercy to all. For other writers, Joseph became the symbol of beauty, or to others as Zulaykha's a lesson in the human tendency to yield to baser temptations.4

Affinity of the three comes through titles, names, and characters; overall plot; and order of occurrences or episodes. In putting the Qur'anic and Biblical Joseph story and the poem in the same set, we are relying on our perception of such affinities; yet I will argue, after comparing the three, that despite the extensive presence of numerous such formal affinities, the three do not tell practically the same story in thematic; theological, or moral terms. In fact, they are probably just as much like other stories as they are like each other,5 as Alter pointed out.

The three stories in question differ in a number of obvious and fundamental ways, whatever the oral qualities and dimensions of the three texts which have come down to us as a written composition. The poem despite its

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5 Alter, the Art., pp. 3-10 referring to Genesis 38.

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having a written form, presents itself as essentially an oral composition as it is the case with our poem which was written by an unknown writer. Many of the readily apparent divergences between the three texts, overall or in renderings of a given story, are traceable, primarily to the natural and predictable consequences of the oral as opposed to the written composition.

The Torah is, moreover, a continuous, extended historical account. The poem and the Qur'an contain very little narrated history. The Torah is written in expository prose; the Qur'an, in compact, often elliptical, quasi-poetic style. The Biblical story, as well as the poem are very detailed and frequently interrupted by narrative digressions and genealogical materials. Qur'anic language presents itself as God's speech, verbatim: the Torah is not constructed throughout as God's quoted speech but rather as reliable third-person narration of divine action.

Smith⁶ suggests that, when one looks at the place of each story within its entire work, the differences are just as striking. In the poem and the Qur'an, Joseph is the subject of one of many teaching stories, albeit one of the longest, most detailed and most colorful. Without it, however, the poem and the Qur'an would still make sense. And without the poem and the Qur'an, the "Sura of Joseph" could still be read on its own, decontextualized as it is. For the Bible, however, the story of Joseph is essential; it accounts for twenty-eight percent of

the Book of Genesis and serves, like most other narratives therein, as a didactic vehicle, in this case to show how God sends signs and constantly guides and rewards the God-fearing. The figure of God seems somewhat more distant in the Biblical story, less concentrated on a relationship with Joseph and more involved with the lives of all of the many characters, whereas in the Qur'an and the poem, God interferes with, and guides His messenger constantly, the other characters remaining more dark and cloudy, and less clearly defined.

In addition to its not being part of a larger historical narrative, the poem and the Qur'anic story is strongly decontextualized in another way. Other than Joseph, no Qur'anic character is named directly ('Aziz, the "name" of Joseph's master, could be construed as a title). This anonymity of other characters has the effect of making the poem and the Qur'anic story even more the story of Joseph, Messenger of God, and less the story of "his people".

The three tellings can also be compared in other ways. Their shapes are different: the Biblical story flows from one state in Joseph's life to another; the Qur'anic story and the poem are self-contained - enclosed by the prediction of the initial dream's meaning and its fulfillment. In the three cases, the narrative is interrupted, but differently. The Qur'anic story and the poem are essentially a single tale. The Biblical story is composite, and the narrator(s) is (are) not nearly so strongly present. The main story about Joseph in Egypt is interrupted by another significant related one (Judah's marriage to Shua and Tamar and the
Sin of Onan and by repetitions of the whole story to a given point thrice, which Robert Alter\(^7\) sees as part of the Bible's way of searching for multi-faceted truth.\(^8\)

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

The three texts sometimes restate in third-person voice, what has been said in dialogue, they avoid indirect speech. By strongly preferring direct speech, they bring the speech-act into the foreground; make the reader more conscious of the speaker and his/her use of language; and produce complicating ambiguity for the interpreter of speech because the narrators, by not standing it in third-person, do not give it their stamp of authority.\(^9\) Therefore "when an actual process of contemplating specific possibilities, sorting out feelings,

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\(^7\) Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p. 50.

\(^8\) ibid., pp. 138, 140, and 153-54.

\(^9\) ibid., p. 38.
weighing alternatives, making resolutions, is a moment in the narrative event, it is reported as direct discourse".

The three texts' reasons for the preference of direct speech lead us to have insights into the three texts, where most fundamental theological points are shared with each other: the intimate relationships among speech (divine and human), creation, and revelation.

As we penetrate more deeply into the theological issues that promote the three texts preference for direct speech, we reach conclusions that all the three texts refer to direct speech:

What is important to all the three texts is human will confronted with alternatives which he may choose on his own or submit to divine determination. Direct oral language provides the indispensable model for defining the rhythm of political or historical alternatives, question and response, creaturely uncertainty against the Creator's intermittently revealed design, where man is set apart from the other creatures; in words each person reveals his distinctive nature, his willingness to enter into binding compacts with men and God, his ability to control others, to deceive them, to feel for them, and to respond to them. Direct
oral language is the base of everything human and divine that transpires in the three versions.

And again,

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

However, despite what appears to be a similar understanding of language itself, the poem and the Qur'an's narrative situation is still different from that of the Bible. Biblical narrators depend on God for their "omniscience" or reliability, and display it, according to Alter, in rather indirect ways in their reliable third-person narrative. The poem and the Qur'an show omniscient God, speaking orally and committed to a high degree of explicitness - to giving clear guidance - being so explicit that the message will grab the attention of the listener. So direct speech appears in the poem and the Qur'an in the way in
which the story is told and oriented. Also, since the poem and the Qur'an are organized as a cumulative oral revelation, the degree to which it is internally coherent and consistent increases to the extent that individual parts reinforce each other and its overall moral and spiritual vision.

The art of the story in the poem and the Qur'anic narrative, which often deals with particular well-known historical stories, is to get those small stories to tell themselves and bear a larger cosmic message at the same time. The poem and the Qur'anic characters are portrayed with an emblematic quality. Figures whom the Bible characterizes thoroughly are minimally portrayed in the poem and the Qur'an to encourage the listener to be free from becoming psychologically entrapped, they are free enough to be instruments of a broader message for a broader audience.

All these differences between the three tellings, as well as the similarities, are largely consistent with their different purposes, natures, and settings, and cannot be explained adequately by an exclusively literary-historical approach. Most importantly, the Joseph in the poem and the Qur'an portrait has to be recognizable as a messenger of God in terms of the composite definition of messengership that emerges from all the poem and the Qur'an's many references to such figures, whereas the Bible does not present Joseph as a messenger at all. The poem and the Qur'anic story of Joseph could in fact be said to focus on Joseph as a representative of instrumental messengership and
as a measure of its nature and effect. It is quite possible to construct a general poetic and the Qur'anic image of the prophetic role and to recognize Joseph according to it. The poem and the Qur'an presentation of Joseph can in fact be seen to be governed by the role according to which he must be recognized. Therefore the characters are presented, in a way that their representation both reflects a larger idea of their type and also contributes to its formation.

A simple collating and analysis of all generic or proper mentions of Messengers in the three texts produce a fairly clear and oft-repeated set of salient characteristics. But because the set has been constructed from mentions of both, those called (nabi) and those sent (rasul), not all characteristics apply equally to all figures. Thus, as Alter\textsuperscript{10} has pointed out:

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

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

3. They are chosen by God, usually from among their own people, without seeking to be chosen. Connected with this, their mortality is constantly stressed; in the terminology of the modern religionist, they are

\textsuperscript{10} Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative, p. 50.
instrumental messengers. In particular, the Qur'an takes pains to distinguish them from angels - who are presented as some kind of medieval heavenly figures - not God but also recognizable as man. Their humanity and instrumentality in turn emphasize God's power.

4. They often polarize their audiences - being opposed by some and believed by others.

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

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

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

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

The clearest evidence of the poem's and the Qur'an's totally different orientation is the role the sub-plot of the master's wife plays in the story as a whole and what it reveals of Joseph's character as a messenger. This episode also marks the widest divergence from the Biblical telling and demonstrates how the poem and the Qur'an make different use of available materials, no matter what their sources. As a result of what emerges from the poem and the Qur'an's use of this sub-plot, Joseph appears more dependent on God himself, rather than on his plan, and less invested with the ability to carry out God's will on his own. In fact, this episode in the poem and the Qur'an has Joseph save another person, the wife, before saving himself, and thereby has him show himself even more to be the instrument of God.

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

In the Qur'an, the story of the wife is more inconclusive, oriented towards exploring and explaining Joseph's beauty, temptation and attractiveness in very human terms, less clear about how or whether the encounter actually leads to his imprisonment. More specifically, in the Qur'an, the wife is the wife of Joseph's buyer, "Aziz", who asked her to install Joseph in their house, perhaps even to be adopted by them. His stay there is used to teach him the dream interpretation he will need, although it is kept secret for the time being. According to the poem and the Qur'an, the wife solicits Joseph, closing him into her room with her. And, the Qur'an states, he would have taken her had he not seen God's signs not to do so. Forewarned of his all too human tendency to succumb, he runs to the door; as the wife grabs him, she tears his shirt from behind. At the door he meets his master, his seducer's husband, who refuses to believe his own wife's lie that Joseph seduced her (because one of his kin witnesses to the contrary and because the shirt has been torn from behind), urging her instead to ask God's forgiveness for the sin she has committed by accusing someone falsely of adultery.
For the poem and the Qur'an, the story does not stop there. Certain of the women of the city blame the wife in their gossip, but the wife contrives to show them how tempting Joseph really is. She invites them to her house, presumably to eat, because when each has a knife in her hand, it has been arranged for them to glimpse this handsome youth (whom they mistake for an angel), whereupon they lose control of themselves enough to cut their hands with the knives. Having made them emphasize with her lust, she admits that she has solicited him but vows to have him imprisoned if she cannot have him. Joseph prays to God to turn him away from their guile but is imprisoned anyway, again for an unexplained reason.

When, two steps later in the narrative, Joseph receives a summons from the king which can release him from prison, he refuses to leave until he is finally cleared with the women - Zulaykha as well as the other women. His former master's wife confesses, attributing no responsibility to God for her actions and all credit to Him for allowing her to correct her more evil human tendencies. Joseph then leaves prison to rise in the king's service.

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

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

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

On this level, the story gives a masterful account of the poem and the Qur'an's psychologically subtle understanding of the relationship between human will and God's power, a subtlety lost on many later theologians. When Joseph interprets the dreams of two youths imprisoned with him, he does so because they ask, associating his special abilities with his being a recognizable good-doer. A small but interesting difference from the Biblical account occurs at this point: In the Bible, the butler who was to remember Joseph after prison, just forgets his youthful counterpart, in the poem and the Qur'an, whose occupation is characteristically unspecified.
In the Qur'an, when Joseph is about to do the interpretation, he uses the forthcoming demonstration of his God-given ability as an occasion to sermonize about tawhid (توحيد) believe in unity of God and shirk (شرك) polythesim, as well as to link the worship of the one God to the tradition of his ancestors - Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (verse 88). Once again, when the brothers return home from seeing Joseph the first time, having been instructed by him to bring back a certain, unnamed brother, the father is suspicious until he sees a sign from Joseph. He, too, uses this as an occasion to sermonize on God's power, urging his sons to put their trust in Him and underlining his own similarity to Joseph. Jacob then tells them how to enter Joseph's house. Although his intention in so doing is left unclear, we are again reminded that the knowledge behind his request has been given to him by God.

In the Qur'an when Joseph's brothers have returned to Egypt and he has revealed himself to them and had them bring back father and mother (not just father as in the Torah), the circle of the story's structure is closed (prematurely for the Bible) by Joseph's summary of the key points of God's involvement in his life and his father's: God's giving him the initial dream, bringing him out of prison, and bringing his father out of the desert (verse 100). Any troubles Joseph has had in his life, he attributes not to God but to Satan (verse 100).
The poem and the Qur'an do not continue the story beyond this point, as does the Bible, to chronicle the rest of Joseph's life. It ends, rather, with a longish homily about the way in which such tales are signs of God's power and judgment as well as vehicles for revelation, just as are the Messengers who bring (or live) them. The poem and the Qur'an is interested mainly in Joseph's role as an exemplary God-fearing man and Messenger.

Finally, in the Qur'an in the last few (verses 11:12). We are reminded by allusion that a salient feature in the lives of all Messengers (especially Mohammad) was exemplified in Joseph: as Qur'an concludes (verses 110-112).

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

At this point, the way in which the wife's story has been structured it takes on a new dimension. Messengers who are clearly telling the truth, even
according to some witnesses, can still suffer from being given the lie by the ignorant. "Belying" is, of course, a key point in the Qur'anic understanding of the challenge of Messengership and the nature of faithlessness and of the constant opposition of *tasdiq* belief and *takdhib* belying in the making of Messenger.

Thus does the story of Joseph show itself to be a vision rather than a version.

And thus does it come to illustrate a number of truths, not just about Messengers, but about all human beings in their relationship with God. Except for what God gives Joseph, and his own will to serve God, Joseph is not extraordinary.

Concerning exegesis, the sociologist Edward Shils observed:\textsuperscript{11}

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

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