



# JOSEPH I. IN PERSIAN LITERATURE

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### i. IN PERSIAN LITERATURE

As a love story with religious overtones, the romance of Yusof and Zolaykā has always been among the very favorite themes of Persian poets who, with direct or oblique references to its various episodes, created a desired imagery, expanded on a particular point in the poem, conveyed a poetic message or reinforced it. For instance, a poet may use the sale of Joseph into slavery by his jealous brothers to create the impression that “there is no replacement for a beloved” and, at the same time, articulate his/her own emotional feelings towards the beloved (Qur’ān 12.20; Surābādi, pp. 1110-17; Abu’l-Fotuḥ Rāzi, VI, p. 356; Sa’di, *ghazal* 585, v. 12; Ḥāfeẓ, *ghazal* 211, v. 7; see also, Šamisā, pp. 625-26). In some cases, a king, or even a vizier, has been likened to Joseph in order to highlight the hardship that he had endured before coming to power and, at the same time, to make a clever allusion to his status as a person who is divinely anointed like a prophet (see, e.g., Abu Ḥanifa Eskāfi, in Bayhaqi, p. 283, v. 14, referring to Sultan Mas’ud Ġaznavi’s defeat of his brother; Sanā’i, p. 506, vv. 10-11, alluding to Bahrāmšāh Ġaznavi’s problems with his brother; Najm-al-Din Rāzi, p. 36, commentaries, p. 568, in reference to the Saljuqid ‘Alā’-al-Din Kayqobād’s imprisonment; Ḥāfeẓ, *ghazal* 242, v. 5, an allusion to the Mozaffarid Shah Maṣṣūr’s rise to power; idem, *ghazal*, 9, v. 9, referring to the



imprisonment of Jalāl-al-Din Turānšāh, the Mozaffarid vizier, and his return to the vizierate).

The representation of Joseph in Persian literature will be treated in two separate sections in this article. The first one will focus on the episodes of the story in various genres of Persian poetry, specially in *gāzals* and *qaṣidas*, while the second section will be devoted to introducing the versified narratives of Yusof and Zolaykā.

*In genres of Persian poetry.* This section, in terms of the poet's exoteric or esoteric approach, will be divided into three periods: naturalistic exotericism, aphoristic-religious esotericism, and Sufi/mystic esotericism.

A) Exoteric poetry. In this genre, the poem usually starts with a cheerful description of nature leading to a panegyric. It rarely implies any sense beyond the literal meaning of the phraseology used. It is a laudatory instrument, through which the poet often explicitly, and occasionally by implication, compares to Joseph the object of his panegyric in traits that Joseph is usually considered exemplary of (e.g., physical beauty, benevolence, noble temperament, deeds, sagacity, etc.). A poet may employ this comparison in an obviously exaggerated sense, referring, for instance, to his object of praise as the true incarnation of Joseph (e.g., 'Onṣori, p. 186, v. 6; Purnāmdāriān, p. 8), or saying that the weather is so nice that it can cure blindness, as the scent of Joseph's shirt cured Jacob's blind eyes ('Onṣori, p. 73, v. 13). Farroki Sistāni (q.v.), panegyricizing Amir Abu Moḥammad Ġaznavi, has called him the true successor of Joseph in cleansing the world of its defects and shortcomings (Farroki, p. 418).

Allusions or direct references to the story of Joseph is only occasionally encountered in the panegyrics of the early Korāsāni-style poets, that is, up to the end of the 10th century (e.g., Farroki, Monjik Termeḍi, Abu Ḥanifa Eskāfi, and 'Aṭā Rāzi, once in each; 'Onṣori, twice; Manučehri, three times). Then, due to the spread of religious ideas and narratives, references to various episodes of the Joseph story increase. For instance, there are twenty-two explicit mentions of the story in the *divān* of the fifth-century poet Qaṭrān Tabrizi (e.g., pp. 3, 4, 40, 73, 134, 145, 158), mostly as an exaggerated point in a panegyric; but, a century later, we find seventy-eight such implicit, figurative, and explicit references in the poetry of Kāqāni Šarvāni/Šervāni (Kāqāni, index, p. 1078).

B) Aphoristic, religious esoteric literature. With the end of the period that is



called the golden age of Iranian culture in the Islamic period (Frye, tr., pp. 116-17), the age of rationalism in Iran gave way to that of the so-called philosophy based on the principles of religion. *Kalām*, or theology, which is considered the philosophical defense of religion, employed intellectual discourse in the service of religion and overshadowed philosophy based on rational reasoning (Dādbeh, pp. 48-49). Aristotelian philosophy was relegated to the realm of myths and legends, and the philosophy of Plato was considered outdated and worn out (Kāqāni, p. 172, vv. 20-21). An antagonistic view of rationalism and Greek philosophy, which was common among theologians (*motakallemun*), found its way into Persian poetry (e.g., Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow, 2001, pp. 234, v. 1, 257, vv. 8-9, 490, v. 8). Authors of aphoristic poetry, made the most of stories with religious content, including the biographical notices about prophets, particularly the story of Joseph. Thus, there appeared a new genre of poetry that has been referred to as religious (*dini*, *šar'i*), aphoristic (*hekmi*) poetry.

The most distinguished poets of this genre are the Ismā'ili poet Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow Qobādiāni (d. 1088), Kāqāni Šarvāni (d. ca. 1198), and Nežāmi Ganjavi (d. ca. 1217). Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow has used the rejuvenation of Zolaykā with a prayer of Joseph for a figurative description of the aging nature (i.e., in winter) that is revitalized and youthful in spring (Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow, 2001, p. 416, vv. 4, 14; Purnāmdāriān, p. 30). The same theme is employed more creatively in a verse by Sa'di, where the rose with its beauty in the meadow is likened to Joseph ruling Egypt, while the spring breeze spreads its fragrance (lit. the scent of his shirt) across the city (*'Aziz-e Meṣr-e čaman šod jamāl-e Yusof-e gol / Šabā ba šahr darāvard bu-ye pirhan-aš*).

Elsewhere Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow compares the effects of his own poetry on Persian to the prayer of Joseph. In other words, his poetry has revitalized Persian in the same way that Joseph's incantation (*afsun*) restored Zolaykā's youth (*Ba man tāza šod pažmorida sokan / Čo za'fsun-e Yusof Zolaykā-ye pir*). The scent of Joseph's shirt that restored Jacob's eyesight provides Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow with a metaphorical point that he uses to symbolize religion as a shirt that looks clean, new, and attractive on the learned, but a torn-out coarse piece of cloth full of holes on the ignorant (Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow, 2001, p. 265, vv. 3-5). Following this theme, he compares the shirt of Joseph to religion and the restoration of Jacob's eyesight to wisdom and sagacity. Thus, it was Jacob's religion and his religiosity that were the source of his knowledge and wisdom. In conclusion, the reader is encouraged to wear the shirt that the prophet Moḥammad has



brought forth, which is following his religion (Nāṣer-e Ƙosrow, 2001, p. 265, vv. 3-5). In order to reinforce his final point, he refers to the romance of Biḡan and Maniḡa in the *Šāh-nāma*, and the imprisonment of Biḡan in a dungeon (lit. *čāh* “well”). He then likens following carnal desires (e.g., gluttony, laziness, lust) to being imprisoned like a captive in a deep well (Nāṣer-e Ƙosrow, 2001, p. 176, v. 5; Purnāmdāriān, p. 34), in order to conclude that the heavenly soul of man in the body is just a prisoner in the dungeon of this world (Nāṣer-e Ƙosrow, 2001, pp. 304, vv. 3-4), and its only salvation is through recourse to wisdom and knowledge (Nāṣer-e Ƙosrow, 2001, pp. 400, vv. 8-9).

Ƙāqāni Šarvāni, a poet with poetical idioms and imagery of his own, makes frequent use of various aspects of the story of Joseph to elaborate his phraseology and to develop and drive across a poetical point (Dašti, pp. 19-20). For instance, he refers to the perfidious behavior of Joseph’s brothers to highlight the duplicity of his own associates and to criticize it (Ƙāqāni, p. 62, v. 10). In the same vein, in order to criticize the prevalent injustice, in a metaphorical reference to the theme of Joseph and the wolf, he portrays the general condition of the time as the wolf of hearts (*gorg-e delhā*) in order to articulate the grievance of the people of piety, whom he refers to as Joseph of hearts (*Yusof-e delhā*; Ƙāqāni, p. 535, v. 6; see also, pp. 25, v. 6, 62, v.10, 124, v. 3 [grieving], pp. 297, v. 7, 324, vv. 8-9 [longing], pp. 607, v. 15, 672, v. 13 [description of the beloved], p. 629, v. 13 [expressing one’s love]). He often generalizes a point to enrich it with connotations and covert references by the use of symbolic and metaphorical expressions, which is more noticeable in the poems containing a mention of Joseph’s story. Three poems are noteworthy in this connection: In a poem complaining about the sufferings and deprivations that he has endured, he calls himself an Alexander failing to find the Water of Life and a Joseph left waiting in the Egypt of expectations, but never finding his desired Canaan in spite of exerting every effort (*Dar Meṣr-e entezār čō Yusof bemānda-am / Besyār jahd kard-am o Kan’ān nayāft-am*). In another poem, in a metaphorical reference to the happy life of Joseph after suffering in a well, he mentions the arduous crossing of the desert before the pilgrim reaches Mecca, and, with an allusion to the Qur’ān (94.5), creates an image illustrating the virtues of being patient and steadfast (Ƙāqāni, p. 97, vv. 9-10; Foruzānfar, *Šarḡ-e Maṭnawi* I, p. 78). In another poem, he uses the story of Joseph to elaborate on the theme of a Qur’ānic verse (2.156): “To God we belong and to Him we return,” which is the favorite subject matter in Sufi literature. As Joseph was kept in a prison, the soul is a prisoner in the physical cage of the body and this dismal world of matter (Ƙāqāni, p. 324, vv. 8-9; cf.



Rumi, I, v. 4).

C) Sufi and mystical esotericism. Mysticism and Sufism (used as synonyms in this paper) are the expression of spiritual and intuitive interpretation of religious ideas through the symbolic and metaphorical application of terms, which, according to the mystics, signifies the true sense of words. The exertion of effort by the pilgrim on the Path (*sālek*) is for the perception of those true meanings (Jorjāni, p. 41). With the metaphorical and symbolic use of the key terms (well, prison, Egypt, Zolaykā, etc.) in the story of Joseph, they describe the descent of the soul from Godhead, its imprisonment in the physical cage (body) in the material world, and its final salvation through self-mortification (see, e.g., Ebn Sinā, vv. 10-11; Sabzavāri, pp. 275-90; Najm-al-Din Rāzi, pp. 111 ff.). Thus, the story of Joseph in the well and his imprisonment are turned into a symbolic description of the downward journey of the soul in stages into the body in the prison of this world of matter. Joseph bears a great deal of hardships (the self-mortification of the pilgrim) before his knowledge of dream interpretation leads to his release from the prison and his investment with the highest office in Egypt, as the intuitive knowledge of the mystic pilgrim brings the soul to the world of Reality to realize his optimum desire (joining Zolaykā). This is the general outline that poets with mystical orientation have employed allegorically according to their own styles and modes of expression. For instance, Sanā'i (d. ca. 1124), in an ode, uses desert (*ṣaḥrā*) as the symbol of the transcendental world (the world of Reality) vis-à-vis the material world (the well) or the body (the prison), in which the soul is kept prisoner (Sanā'i, *Divān*, p. 492, vv. 7-8). Elsewhere he refers to the scent of Joseph or of his shirt as the divine breath (*dam-e elāhi, nafka*) or the inner soul (*ruḥ-e bāṭen*), which has been lost to man, as Joseph was to Jacob (*Divān*, p. 412, v. 4; cf. p. 464, v. 4). He exhorts that it would be unbecoming of man, who carries the divine soul (lit. has the Joseph of Egypt as companion), to be subservient to Satan and absorbed by its ungodly manifestations (*Divān*, pp. 464, v. 3, 468, v. 1; see also Purnāmdāriān, pp. 42-43).

The same general theme is elaborated on in his *Ḥa-diqat al-ḥaqiqa* with expressive religious exhortations. He calls the Qur'ān the rope that man's wisdom may use to save him from the abyss that the trickery of Satan has made him remain, as Joseph was from the well into which he had fallen through the duplicity of his brothers. Thus, man will reach salvation and bliss like Joseph when he can discover the hidden secrets of the Qur'ān (Sanā'i, *Ḥadiqa*, pp. 178, vv. 11-12, 15-18, 179, vv. 4-6, 492, v. 4; Purnāmdāriān, p. 41).



Joseph's story in other Sufi works is mostly along the same lines as that which one finds in the poetry of Sanā'i, distinct only in terms of the imagery and poetic expressions. For instance, Farid-al-Din 'Aṭṭār (d. 1221, q.v.) refers to the transcendental world as *Meṣr-e jān* (the Egypt/city of souls), *Meṣr-e 'ālam-e jān*, and *Meṣr-e 'ezzāt* (the Egypt/city of glory; *Divān*, p. 828, p. 5; *Moṣibat-nāma*, pp. 134, v. 19, 175, v. 18; *Manteq al-ṭayr*, p. 37, v. 659). According to him, the Joseph of soul, which must return to the *Meṣr-e jān* from his captivity in the abyss of this world, succeeds in this pursuit only when he has replaced the lascivious spirit (*nafs-e ammāra*) by the Solomon of pure soul on the throne of his existence ('Aṭṭār, *Asrār-nāma*, p. 99, vv. 1605-09). Thus, he will be able to release the truthful Joseph of pure soul from this dusty residence and set him on the throne in the Egypt of glory ('Aṭṭār, *Manteq al-ṭayr*, p. 37, vv. 656-59). Elsewhere, 'Aṭṭār uses Joseph as the symbol of the beloved in the profane love of those who consider divine love, which is the one and only true love, beyond the reach of man ('Aṭṭār, *Manteq al-ṭayr*, pp. 58-60, vv. 1035-37, 1043-55; Foruzānfar, *Šarḥ-e aḥwāl*, p. 360). In most mystical interpretations of the story, however, Joseph, or the human soul, is able to be in command of the higher universe through self mortification, and that is when the soul that has reached perfection leaves its physical prison and returns to its original abode (Dārābi, p. 40).

*Versified versions of the story.* The composition of versified romantic epics dates from the early phase of the history of Persian poetry (e.g., *Wāmeq and 'Ādrā*, attributed to 'Onṣori, the love romance of "Biḡān o Maniḡa" in the *Šāh-nāma*; see Ṣafā, II, pp. 359-61). The earliest versified version of the romance of Joseph in Persian (*Yusof o Zolaykā*), now lost, was composed by the 10th-century poet Abu'l-Mo'ayyad Balḡi (q.v., Ṣafā, I, pp. 402-3; for him, see *Tāriḡ-e Sistān*, p. 35; 'Awfi, II, p. 26). More versified versions were composed during the following centuries, all of which, bearing the same title of *Yusof o Zolaykā*, were based on the Qur'ānic narrative (chap. 12).

The first version is the one that is attributed to Ferdowsi (q.v.) by some copyist (q.v.; Ṣafā, I, p. 490), a view taken at face value by a number of scholars, including Theodore Nöldeke (tr. 'Alawi, pp. 53-54), Hermann Ethé (pp. 58-59), and Edward G. Browne (II, pp. 146-47, III, p. 532). Some scholars have considered such attribution only a possibility (Ritter, pp. 39-40; Mortaḡawi, p. 158). More recent scholarship, however, has demonstrated that the attribution of this work to Ferdowsi is totally unfounded (Minovi, pp. 48-49; Ṣafā, I, pp. 489-90; Ḥāfeḡ Širāni, 1968, pp. 310 ff.; Riāḡi, p. 104; Mortaḡawi, pp. 157-81). It is



the work of a poet known probably by the name of Amāni or Šamsi, who composed it for his patron, Šams-al-Din ʿŢoġānšāh b. Alp Arslān Saljuġi, who had released the poet from the prison “in which he had been held like Joseph” (Minovi, pp. 49-68; Nafisi, I, pp. 41, 53-54).

A versified romance of Yusof and Zolaykā has been attributed to the poet ‘Am‘aq Boġārā‘i (d. 1147-48, q.v.) by some biographers, but it has been lost. It could reportedly be read in two different meters (Dawlatšāh, p. 64; Āḡar Bigdeli, p. 330; Faġri Heravi, p. 17; Awḡadi, p. 696; Hedāyat, I, p. 880; Šafā, II, p. 541).

The most celebrated versified rendering of this romance is the *Yusof o Zolaykā* by Nur-al-Din ‘Abd-al-Raḡmān Jāmi (d. 1492, q.v.), who composed it in 1483. It follows the meter of Neẓāmi Ganjavi’s *Ķosrow o Širin* and forms the fifth poem in the poet’s collection of seven *maṭnawis* known as *Haft owrang* “Seven thrones” (Jāmi, II, pp. 20-205; Šafā, IV, p. 360). The romance ends in the union and the eventual death of both protagonists. It was edited with metrical German translation by Vincez Edlem von Rosenweig (Vienna, 1824). There are also two English renderings done by R. T. H. Griffith and A. Rogers rendered in the late 19th century (Browne, III, pp. 516, 531-32).

We have another versified version of the story from the 15th century, composed by Ķvāja Mas‘ud Qomi (d. 1490), a poet on the entourage of Amir ‘Ali-Šir Navā‘i. It is a *maṭnawi* of 3,900 verses based on the thirty-second chapter of the Qur‘ān and its exegeses (Ķvāja Mas‘ud, p. 99, vv. 7, 10). It follows the meter of Neẓāmi’s *Leyli o Majnun* (Nafisi, I, p. 316; Navā‘i, pp. 38-39; Awḡadi, pp. 991-92; Šabā, pp. 736-38). There are several more versions of the romance of Yusof and Zolaykā narrated in verse. More notable among them are those of Maḡmud Big Sālem Tabrizi (fl. 10th cent.), Nāẓem Heravi (fl. 11th cent.), and Āḡar Bigdeli (d. 1780), the last two emulating Jāmi’s *maṭnawi* (Šafā, V, p. 595-96; Āḡar Bigdeli, pp. 434-55). Other versified versions of the romance are by Pirjamāli Ardestāni (d. 1474), Jonayd-Allāh Maḡdum Heravi, Ķāvāri Širāzi, Mirā Dawlat Big, Mollā Mahdi Šo‘la Golpāyagāni, Šehāb Toršizi, Nāẓem Heravi, Šamsi ‘Erāqi, etc. (see Ķayyāmpur, 1960, pp. 40, 45-46, 54-58; Monzawi, IV, pp. 3331-46).

All of these are versified romantic stories that are in essence based on the text and exegeses of the thirty-second chapter of the Qur‘ān (chap. 32), with overtones of mystic ideas and symbolism. Jāmi and Āḡar Bigdeli explicitly identify their versions as a mystical narration of this romance. Jāmi, describes



Zolaykā as an example of a person who has devoted her entire life to love in order to remove all existing veils so that she could get bask in the Sun of the Truth (Jāmi, vv. 3552-68; cf. Āḍar Bigdeli, p. 454).

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