



JOSEPH II. IN QUR'ĀNIC EXEGESIS

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In the Qur'ān, the story of the prophet Joseph is unique in being related as one continuous narrative, making up almost the entirety of chapter (sura) 12, which is named after him *Surat Yusuf*. By contrast, the stories of other prophets, such as Abraham (Ebrāhim), Moses (Musā), and Noah (Nuḥ), tend to be related in the Qur'ān as isolated events, which may be told more than once and in different ways, according to the context. Joseph's story, however, begins (v. 4) with his informing his father of a dream in which he has seen the sun, moon, and eleven stars prostrating themselves before him, and it ends with the dream's coming true and the reunion in Egypt of Joseph with his parents and brothers and their prostrating themselves before him (v. 100). This Qur'ānic narrative is only briefly interrupted by divine comments and exhortations, such as "and God is aware of what they do" (v. 19), or "God always prevails in His purpose, though most people do not realize it" (v. 21), or "God rewards the charitable" (v. 88).

The following statement in the third verse: "and We narrate unto you the best (or most beautiful) of stories (*aḥsan al-qeṣaṣ*)" is taken by most commentators to be a reference to the story of Joseph, though Abu Ja'far Moḥammad Ṭabari



(d. 923) and Abu 'Ali Faḡl b. Ḥasan Ṭabresi (d. 1154) give precedence to the view that it is a reference to the Qur'ān itself. Commentators present numerous reasons for Joseph's story being designated "the best of stories," namely, because it contains lessons (*'ebar*), subtle points (*nokāt*), pieces of wisdom (*ḥekam*), and wonders (*'ajā'eb*; Faḡr-al-Din Rāzi, XVIII, p. 85; Zamaḡšari, III, p. 251); or because it contains everything that is required for a good story, including separation (*forqat*) and union (*waṣlat*), glorification (*'ezz*) and humiliation (*ḍell*), wealth (*ḡanā'*) and poverty (*faqr*), lover (*āšeq*) and beloved (*ma'šūq*), love (*ḥobb*) and hatred (*boḡḡ*), grief (*anduh*) and joy (*šādī*), governorship (*amiri*) and imprisonment (*asiri*; Surābādi, II, p. 1091); or because it contains mention of the virtuous (*šāleḡhān*), angels (*fereštaḡān*), demons (*šayāṭin*), men and jinn, cattle and birds, the conduct of kings (*siar-al-moluk*), and the propriety in the conduct of slaves (*ādāb-e mamālik*), the manner of merchants (*ṭariqat al-tojjār*), the mention of those who are wise (*'oqalā'*) and those who are ignorant (*johhāl*), differing situations (*eḡtelāf-e aḡwāl*), and the craftiness of women (*makr-e zanān*); and moreover, the mention of the divine oneness (*tawḡid*), jurisprudence (*feqh*), knowledge about the virtues (*'elm-e siar*), the interpretation of dreams (*ta'bir-e k'vāb*), how to rule (*ādāb-e siāsat*), etiquette of social life (*ḡosn-e mo'āšarat*), and earning a living (*ma'āš*; Abu'l-Fotuḡ Rāzi, XI, p. 7).

Commentators present a variety of reasons or circumstances for the revelation (*asbāb al-nozul*) of *Surat Yusof*, which include the following: a) Jewish scholars suggested to some powerful men among the polytheists that they should test Prophet Moḡammad by asking him why the family of Jacob moved to Egypt and about the story of Joseph (Faḡr-al-Din Rāzi, XVIII, p. 84); b) the Companions expressed to the Prophet their wish for God to reveal a sura in which there was no command or prohibition or promise or threat, so that they might be uplifted and joyful in reciting it (Meybodi, V, p. 3), c) or that there should be a story but no mention of religious obligation (*taklif*), and that they should find comfort (*tasalli*) in reading it (Surābādi, II, p. 1090); d) the Jews were boasting that in the Torah they had the best of stories and the Muslims did not have such a story (Surābādi, II, p. 1090; Meybodi, V, p. 3). All the commentaries seem to agree that the sura was revealed to provide comfort and reassurance to Moḡammad, who, at the time that it was revealed was suffering persecution from his own people, the Qorayš.

Throughout the history of Qur'ānic exegesis, *Surat Yusof* appears to have held a particular interest for commentators. Given the range of content in the



Qur'ānic story of Joseph, as indicated above, it is not surprising to find a corresponding variety of approaches to the interpretation of the sura, which on the one hand provides considerable scope for narrative expansion, and on the other raises numerous ethical and theological issues, while at the same time being susceptible of a range of esoteric interpretations. *Surat Yusuf* is also one of the few, and possibly the earliest sura, to have been treated in independent commentaries, such as *al-Settin al-jāme' le-laṭā'ef al-basātin* of Aḥmad b. Moḥammad Ṭusi (fl. 11th cent.), the *Baḥr al-maḥabba* attributed to Aḥmad Ġazālī (d. 1126), the *Zahr al-kemām fi qeṣṣat Yusuf 'alayh al-salām*, of Serāj-al-Din Abu Ḥafs 'Omar Awsi (fl. 1284), and the *Ḥadā'eq al-ḥaqā'eq* of Mo'in-al-Din Farāhi Heravi (d. 1502).

This article will discuss a selection of better known commentaries on the sura in a number of Arabic and Persian texts and will highlight some salient features of the interpretation of the sura, as well as verses or points in the story that have aroused particular interest in both exoteric and esoteric approaches to Qur'ān interpretation.

EXOTERIC COMMENTARIES IN ARABIC

Although the story of Joseph is presented as a running narrative in the Qur'ān, it is, like other stories in the Qur'ān, related in a manner that is often elliptical. Thus, exoteric commentaries, in varying degrees, perform the function of filling in gaps in the narrative, and attempt to identify unnamed characters. In many cases, the exoteric commentaries not only fill in narratives for the sake of clarification, but also add numerous details. Much, though certainly not all the material that is employed by commentators to fill in and amplify the narrative is said to derive from the *Esrā'iliyāt*, that is, traditions drawn from the body of knowledge about Biblical events and persons which was shared by Jews, Christians, and early Muslims, and often used to complement the succinct information found in the Qur'ān. Many of these traditions, however, are actually cited on the authority of Ebn 'Abbās (d. ca. 687) or Esmā'il b. 'Abd-al-Raḥmān Soddi (d. 745) as much, if not more than on the authority of the Jewish convert Abu Eshāq Ka'b-al-Aḥbār (d. 652-53) or of Abu 'Abd-Allāh Wahb b. Monabbih (d. 728 or 732), whose names are usually associated with the *Esrā'iliyāt*. Several parallels may be found in Jewish sources for the material that appears in the commentaries; for example, accounts of the immense physical strength of Joseph's brothers (Ginzberg, pp. 16, 106-8), or of one brother who took pity on Joseph and stayed by the well and brought him food (Ginzberg, p. 14), though names may differ (Yahudā in the Qur'ān



commentaries, Zebulon in the Midrash). There are other details that do not have obvious correspondences, such as Joseph's eventual marriage to Zolaykā, and Zolaykā's being a virgin, since Potiphar, her husband, was impotent (Ṭabari, 1955-69, XVI, p. 151). According to Louis Ginzberg (p. 38), Joseph marries Aseneth (or Asenath), the daughter of Dinah and Shechem (but Potipahr's daughter in Genesis 41:45), who had been abandoned as a baby and adopted by Potiphar, and who was the same infant who spoke and attested to Joseph's innocence when Zolaykā attempted to implicate him. Moreover, in the Jewish tradition Potiphar was not considered impotent, but rather it was Zolaykā who was barren.

Among the commentaries, Ṭabari's *Jāme' al-bayān* includes by far the greatest number of traditions supplying information not found in the Qur'ānic story, and these make up the largest portion of his commentary. In this regard, Ṭabari's commentary on *Surat Yusuf* resembles his account of Joseph's story in his *Ta'riḳ*. In the *Jāme' al-bayān*, he lists all the relevant traditions, those that present alternative opinions as well as those that record identical or similar information but with different chains of authority. Thus, for instance, among the numerous traditions he presents describing the exceptional beauty of Joseph, are five differently sourced traditions relating that a thirds of all beauty was bestowed upon Joseph and his mother, while the remaining third was bestowed on the rest of creation (Ṭabari, 1955-69, XVI, pp. 79-81). Other commentaries include far fewer traditions and usually only supply the original source of authority rather than a complete chain of authority (*esnād*) as in Ṭabari's *Jāme' al-bayān*. The commentators also include several Hadiths of the Prophet relating to different events in the story, apart from those which they cite to support their arguments. For example, in the context of verse 42, in which Joseph asks one of his fellow prisoners to remember him to his lord, most of the commentaries cite the Prophet's saying: "God have mercy on my brother Joseph; had he not said 'remember me to your lord,' he would not have stayed in prison seven years over and above the five" (Ṭabari, 1955-69, XVI, p. 112; Bayḏāwī, p. 461, tr. Beeston, p. 25).

All the Arabic commentaries on *Surat Yusuf* include explanations and discussions of the variant readings as well as discussions of lexicography and grammar to clarify the literal meaning of the Qur'ānic story of Joseph. None of the variant readings discussed in the commentaries appear to have great significance for the meaning of the story, since they involve small details, such as whether part of Joseph's brothers attempt to persuade their father to allow



Joseph to go with them (v. 12) includes the word *narta'* meaning “we shall be well off” or “enjoy ourselves” eating fruit and the like, from the verb *rata'a* meaning to feast, to revel, or *narta'*, from form VIII of the verb *ra'ā*, meaning to graze cattle, or *yarta'* with Joseph as the subject (Bayzāwī, p. 454, tr. Beeston, pp. 7-8).

Apart from employing glosses, explanations of variant readings and linguistic discussions in order to define and clarify the meaning, and adding traditional material to fill in and augment the story, exoteric commentators engage, to varying degrees, in theological and ethical discussions concerning certain verses of *Surat Yusuf*. They also occasionally reflect on salutary lessons raised by the story, although this aspect of exegesis is more prevalent in Sufi commentaries. Verses that are of particular concern from a theological point of view are those that might imply some error on the part of a prophet, for example, the actions of Joseph's brothers towards him (vv. 9-18); the extent of Jacob's grieving (vv. 84-85); Joseph's implicating Benjamin in the theft of his drinking cup, and accusing his brothers first of stealing and then of lying (vv. 70-76); and especially the incident between Joseph and Zolaykā (vv. 23-24). Other matters that appear to have been of concern include whether or not prophets can receive charity (*ṣadaqa*) in the context of verse 88, and the prostration of Joseph's parents and brothers before him (v. 100). Some of the commentaries also include interesting discussions of the different kinds of dreams and their interpretation (Fakr-al-Din Rāzi, XVIII, pp. 87-88, 135, 146; Ṭabresi, III, p. 233), and whether or not it is right to believe in the evil eye (Ṭabresi, III, p. 249; Zamaḳṣarī, III, p. 306). The interpretations of these issues by the different commentators reveal both their stance on various theological matters and their individual interests.

Among the commentators, Ṭabari does not attach particular importance to Joseph's immunity from sin (*ʿeṣma*), and when commenting on verse 24: “She [Zolaykā] desired him [Joseph] and he would have desired her were it not that he saw the proof of his Lord (*laqad hammat behi wa hamma behā law lā an ra'ā borhān rabbehī*),” he includes numerous traditions that affirm not only Joseph's desire for Zolaykā but also the extent to which his desire took him. For instance, “He [Joseph] loosened his waistband and sat as one who would possess would sit” (Ṭabari, 1955-69, XVIII, p. 35). He does nonetheless pose the hypothetical question whether it is allowable for the prophet Joseph to be described in this way (i.e., close to committing adultery), and in answer he presents several possible arguments. First are those that are based on the



acceptance of his error: a) It was in the way of a test from God, because God tests prophets with error (*ka-ṭiya*), so that when they realize what they are doing they will be in tremendous awe (*wajal*) and more concerned to obey Him, and they will know that they should not rely on the abundance of God's forgiveness and mercy; b) He tests them with such things in order to make them recognize His blessing towards them and forgiveness of them by His abandoning His punishment of them in the Hereafter; c) He tests them thereby to make them models for the people of sin (*ahl al-donub*), so that they should hope for mercy and not despair if they repent. Second are the arguments of those who "go against what is said by the early Muslims (*salaf*) and interpret the Qur'ān according to their own opinion": a) The woman desired Joseph and he desired to strike her or inform her of the reprehensibility of her desire, and therefore his seeing the proof of his Lord made him refrain from hurting her, so he was prevented from the evil and depravity (*le-naṣrefa 'anho al-su'*; v. 24) of harming her; b) "She desired him (*hammat behi*) is the end of one proposition, while "he desired her" is the beginning of another, with the word order in reverse, that is, "He would have desired her had he not seen the proof of his Lord." (The latter is rejected by Ṭabari as being atypical of Arabic usage.) Yet others, according to Ṭabari, look at the nature of the desire: Joseph desired the woman without any inclination towards either carrying out or abandoning the desire and without any determination or intention (Ṭabari, 1955-69, XVI, 37-39).

Commentators who do not accept the possibility that any sin, minor or major, should be attached to Joseph, use one or more of the arguments in Ṭabari's second category, while Ṭabresi refines the discussion by differentiating two meanings for the word *hamm*. If it signifies intent, then Joseph did not share the same intent as Zolaykā, his intention was rather to repel her, but if *hamm* is to be understood as desire or lust (*ṣahwa*), then Ṭabresi allows that this might have been the natural inclination of a young man towards a woman, but that no intent was added to it (Ṭabresi, III, pp. 224-25). Faḳr-al-Din Rāzi is so concerned to uphold the infallibility (*ʿeṣma*) of Joseph that he is even prepared to dismiss well-known traditions transmitted on the authority of Ebn 'Abbās, Esmā'il Soddi, and others, to whom Ṭabari refers as the early Muslims (*salaf*). He goes to great lengths to argue that Joseph's desire was merely to drive Zolaykā away, and considers Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Alī Wāḥedi (d. 1075) and others who accept the validity of the traditions as being among the Ḥaṣwiya (scholars of little worth). He also adds the ironic comment that Zolaykā only attempted to implicate Joseph once and, as soon as his innocence had been demonstrated,



left off accusing him, unlike those Ḥašwis who almost 4,000 years later continue to accuse him! (Faḵr-al-Din Rāzi, XVIII, p. 122).

Faḵr-al-Din Rāzi's understanding of *ʿeṣma* seems to have been more comprehensive than that of other commentators, such that no fault whatsoever should be attached to a prophet. Throughout his commentary on *Surat Yusuḥ*, he anticipates any possible objection or criticism that might be made, and has an answer or several answers for it. For example, he poses the hypothetical question "Since favoring one child over another causes hatred and jealousy, and since Jacob would have known this, why did he enter into such favoritism? Also, the older or most knowledgeable child has more excellence [and therefore is worthier of favoritism], so why did Jacob overturn this principle?" His answer is that Jacob only favored Joseph and his brother in love, and love cannot be controlled, therefore he is not worthy of blame (Faḵr-al-Din Rāzi, XVIII, p. 93).

Jār-Allāh Zamaḵṣari's commentary appears to manifest his Mu'tazilite theology at various points in his interpretation of *Surat Yusuḥ*. For example, when commenting on Joseph's words, "I would prefer prison to that to which they [these women] are calling me (v. 33)," he states that this was Joseph's fleeing [from that sin] to God's grace and protection (*ʿeṣma*) in the forbearance that he had determined for himself. There was no question of God's compelling him to be chaste or to take refuge in Him (Zamaḵṣari, III, p. 282). Zamaḵṣari engages in polemics when he interprets Jacob's command to his sons, "Do not all enter by one gate, use different gates . . ." (v. 67), which most commentators explain as being an expression of Jacob's fear of the evil eye. He argues that it is possible that when a thing is looked at and admired, God brings about some impairment or fault in it, and he observes that this matter (i.e., the question of the evil eye) distinguishes the people who seek the truth (*moḥaqqequn*) from those who remain at a superficial, literal level (*ahl al-ḥašw*), for the seeker of the truth will say that it is the act of God, while the Ḥašwi will say that it is the effect of the eye (Zamaḵṣari, III, p. 306).

EXOTERIC COMMENTARIES IN PERSIAN

Persian *tafsirs* vary considerably in the extent to which they include exegetical discussions of a technical nature and Arabic quotations (see [EXEGESIS iii](#)). Thus, some Persian commentaries on *Surat Yusuḥ* resemble their Arabic counterparts, and include discussions of variant readings, lexicography, grammar, and relevant traditions, which may be presented in Arabic with full



(Abu'l-Fotuḥ Rāzi) or partial (**Meybodi**) translation in Persian, or solely presented in Persian (Surābādi). Other commentaries consist mainly of a translation of the verses and story telling, which is how the *Tarjama-ye tafsir-e Ṭabari* may be described. In fact, a comparison between the commentary on *Surat Yusuf* in the so-called “Persian Ṭabari” and that of Ṭabari’s *Jāme’ al-bayān* reveals how little they have in common. Following the translation of the verses, the “Persian Ṭabari” simply relates the story of Joseph, beginning with the birth of Jacob, continuing with the life of Joseph and ending with his death and burial. While it draws on much traditional material, it does not specifically cite any traditions; the material is simply integrated into the narrative.

In general it can be said that storytelling becomes a more prominent feature of Persian *tafsirs*, and among them the *Tafsir* of Surābādi is particularly notable for its colorful and at times dramatic narrative, which is clearly exemplified in the commentary on the story of Joseph. Here we find some lively passages of dialogue, as when Joseph’s brothers tease him and try to entice him into the idea of going out into the desert with them, saying, “You are too clever to think that you should be brought up so tied to the apron strings (*dāman parvarda*)! [How come] you just sit there in the house as girls do and never come out to see those pleasant meadows, so you can become like a man? If you could only once come and see what games we play and what fantastic (*bu’l-‘ajab*) things we do, you wouldn’t be able to sit quietly in the house for one day” (Surābādi, II, p. 1099). Surābādi also includes unusual material that is not found either in other well-known commentaries or in the stories about prophets (*qeṣaṣ al-anbiā*). For example, when Joseph is going to detain Benjamin in Egypt on the accusation of stealing his drinking cup, Surābādi, like some other commentators, relates how Joseph’s brother Yahudā tries to intimidate him into returning Benjamin to them by threatening to yell so loudly that every pregnant creature in the kingdom would immediately deliver its young. Surābādi adds to this a scene in which Joseph humiliates Yahudā by demonstrating his own superior strength, and taunts him with the words, “So you thought that no one was a man like you?” (Surābādi, II, p. 1170). Another example is the scene in which Zolaykā, on the suggestion of her nursemaid (*dāya*), has a house built with seven chambers lavishly furnished and decorated with paintings of herself in the embrace of Joseph (Surābādi, II, pp. 1125-26).

Meybodi also includes some lively passages of narrative in the Nawba II



sections of his *Kašf al-asrār*, as, for example, the scene where Zolaykā and another wealthy woman of Egypt try to outbid each other in the purchase of Joseph (Meybodi, V, 35). However, passages of storytelling are interrupted in Meybodi's commentary by conventional exegetical discussions, whereas Surābādi has integrated his exegetical explanations into the narrative so that they are barely noticeable, as when he briefly answers the question as to why the masculine pronominal suffix is used for the sun, the moon, and stars, when they are non-rational beings (Surābādi, II, p. 1095).

The *Tāj al-tarājem* of Abu'l-Moẓaffar Esfarāyeni and the *Rawḡ al-jenān* of Abu'l-Fotuḥ Rāzi also contain plenty of narrative passages to provide additional background information and augment Joseph's story, though these commentaries do not boast the colorful or dramatic story-telling of Surābādi and Meybodi. Both Esfarāyeni and Abu'l-Fotuḥ Rāzi cite numerous traditions, mostly naming the original source from which they are transmitted, with Rāzi including both Sunnite and Shi'ite Hadiths. Esfarāyeni omits discussions of variant readings and grammar, but does discuss matters of interest to him, such as the importance of dreams and their interpretation (Esfarāyeni, III, pp. 1081-82), the possibility of major or minor sins being attributed to prophets either before or after their being summoned to prophethood (Esfarāyeni, III, pp. 1047-48). Abu'l-Fotuḥ Rāzi's commentary does include discussions of language and variant readings, or lengthy quotations of Arabic poetry. In his interpretations he has points in common with his contemporary Shi'ite commentator Abu 'Ali Ṭabresi. However, he includes fewer theological discussions in his commentary on *Surat Yusof*.

SUFI COMMENTARIES

Sufi commentators, on the whole, focus much of their attention on the lessons (*'ebar*, sing. *'ebrat*) and deeper meanings that may be elicited from the Qur'ānic verses, and the story of Joseph provides them with ample scope to draw out lessons of mystical, ethical, theological, and metaphysical significance. The doctrine of the divine preordination (*qazā'* or *taqdir*) and omnipotence (*qodra*) is prominent in all these commentaries, and manifests itself in two teachings: the first is that God is the controller and provider of all things and that human beings should have complete trust in Him; and the second is the prevailing of the divine decree (*taqdir*) over human contrivance and design (*tadbir*). An interesting feature of the development of Sufi commentaries on *Surat Yusof* from the early 12th century onwards is a growing prominence of the doctrines of love. This development results in a complete change in the role of Jacob,



who is transformed from excessively grieving father (Solami, Or 9433, fols. 123a-123b) to a prototype of the mystic lover of God (Meybodi, V, pp. 82, 105-6, 127-32, 139-41; Ruzbehān, I, pp. 413, 431, 438, 444-46). Zolaykā's role also undergoes a significant change, from that of Joseph's temptress, a woman who was subject to the basest lust (Solami, Or 9433, fol. 116), to a lover moving from human to divine love (Meybodi, V, pp. 87-90) and the noble object of Joseph's love (Ruzbehān, I, 414). In Sufi commentaries, several aspects of Joseph's story take on new significance, such as the women of Egypt cutting their hands and Jacob catching the scent of Joseph as the caravan is departing from Egypt on its way to Canaan.

Many of the comments transmitted from early mystics that are included in Solami's *Ḥaqā'eq al-tafsir* emphasize the need to fear and depend only on God. In conveying these doctrines through their interpretations, these early commentators appear to have no hesitation in "finding fault" with the prophet Jacob. For example, when Jacob accepts Joseph's brothers' assurance that they will take good care of him, Ebn 'Aṭā' comments, "If he [Jacob] had sent him with them, surrendering to destiny, he [Joseph] would have been protected. But he placed his reliance on their reassurance . . . and they were treacherous. If he had left off planning (*tadbir*) and that reliance on their care, he would have been protected, as was the case later when [Benjamin was taken from him] and he said 'God is the best of protectors' " (v. 64; Solami, ed. Nwyia, p. 59, repr. in Purjawādi, p. 101). Jacob's grieving over the loss of Joseph to the point of losing his sight is interpreted in a critical manner by several commentators (e.g., Abu Sa'id al-Ḳarrāz, Abu Sa'id al-Qoraṣī, and Ebn 'Aṭā') as being a result of his grieving for other than God.

Such comments are softened in the *Laṭā'ef al-eṣārāt* of Abu'l-Qāsem Qoṣayri, possibly demonstrating a discreet awareness on Qoṣayri's part of the doctrines of love (Keeler, 2006b, p. 15). For example, Qoṣayri cites a comment of Abu 'Ali Daqqāq that Jacob did not really go blind, his sight was merely veiled to prevent his seeing other than Joseph, and Qoṣayri adds the observation: "There is nothing harder for lovers than looking at [other than the beloved] in times of separation" (Qoṣayri, p. 200). Likewise, earlier in the story, when Jacob allows Joseph to go with his brothers, Qoṣayri (p. 172) states that the lover gives the comfort of the beloved precedence over his own desires.

Whereas there are mere hints of the theme of love in Qoṣayri's commentary on *Surat Yusof*, the theme of love comes fully into its own in the mystical section of Meybodi's *Kaṣf al-asrār*. While the theme of the prevailing of divine



preordination (*taqdir*) over human contrivance (*tadbir*) is certainly not absent from Meybodi's commentary on the story of Joseph (Meybodi, V, pp. 25, 46-47), love is unmistakably the predominant theme, for instance, when Meybodi comments on verse 3, "We narrate unto you the best of stories," he describes it simply as, "a story of lover and beloved, a tale of separation and union (*qeṣṣa-ye 'āseq o ma'suq wa ḥadiṭ-e ferāq o weṣāl*)" (Meybodi, V, p. 11). Jacob is the main protagonist in Meybodi's interpretation and is presented as the prototype of the mystic lover of God, while Joseph's beauty (*jamāl-e yusofi*) represents the divine Beloved. The suffering that Jacob had to go through in separation from Joseph was, as Meybodi demonstrates, in order to perfect his love (Meybodi, V, p. 11). Commenting on Jacob's words, "I perceive the scent of Joseph" (v. 94), he observes that when Joseph was in the well just a short distance away, Jacob did not detect Joseph's scent, but now at a distance of eighty *parasangs* he could perceive it, and he explains that until a person is mellowed in love (*poḵta-ye 'ešq*) and trampled about (*kufta*) by love's affliction, he will not catch the scent of love (Meybodi, V, p. 140). Zolaykā is generally sympathetically treated in Meybodi's commentary. In the Nawbat II commentary she seems to play the role of the lover who graduates, by being deprived of her lover, from human to divine love. In Nawbat III commentary, however, she is the prototype of the mystic lover who is inevitably subjected to blame (*malāmat*) by the women of Egypt, which she welcomes for the sake of her beloved, and then when the women of Egypt, in a state of bewilderment, cut their hands at the sight of Joseph, Zolaykā is shown, by comparison, to be an adept in love, in the advanced mystic state of stability (*tamkin*; Meybodi, V, pp. 55-61).

In his *Arā'es al-bayān*, Ruzbehān Baqli finds scope within the story of Joseph to expound his own teachings on love, which are centered on his doctrine of *eltebās* (God's manifestation or theophany in the beauty of creation which veils His essence). Commenting on verse 3, he explains that the sura's beauty (or goodness) "lies in its elucidation of human love and its flight from the [human] level to the level of divine love and contemplation of the Eternal" (Ruzbehān, p. 406). Joseph represents for Ruzbehān the manifestation of the divine beauty in creation; he was "a mirror of God" on earth. Ruzbehān's explanation of Jacob's going blind from the sorrow of separation from Joseph is very different from those of the earlier commentators cited by Solami. He explains that Jacob was privileged with the station of *eltebās*, and for him the theophany of God was held in the mirror of Joseph's countenance, so that when Joseph was separated from him he lost that intermediary and therefore



was deprived of the beholding of God (Ruzbehān, p. 438). In Ruzbehān's commentary, Zolaykā herself becomes a manifestation of divine beauty for Joseph, which is why he affirms Joseph's desiring her in verse 24 and shows it in an entirely positive light: "There was an unveiling in the face of Zolaykā as the Holy was manifest in her. He [Joseph] was drawn by that holiness to the desire (*hamm*), so that he might taste the sweetness of human love and thereby attain divine love, and be drawn to the kingdom of pre-eternity and eternity" (Ruzbehān, p. 416). Nonetheless, in Ruzbehān's teaching the mystic must seek to go beyond the station of *eltebās*, and this is explained when he comments on Joseph's detaining Benjamin in Egypt, where Joseph takes on the role of spiritual mentor for Jacob: "Joseph saw in the heart of Jacob some inclination towards intermediaries, and he wanted the old man to attain the isolation (*tafrīd*) of non-origination from creation, which presupposes that he (i.e., Jacob) would purify his innermost consciousness (*serr*) of the manifestation of divine Beauty (Ruzbehān, p. 430).

In 'Abd-al-Razzāq Kāšāni's commentary on the story of Joseph in his *Tafsir al-Qor'ān al-karīm*, we find a departure from the theme of love in the interpretation of *Surat Yusuf*. In Kāšāni's hermeneutics, figures in the stories of the prophets become symbols for different levels and functions of the human microcosm, and in the story of Joseph he finds particular scope to expound the journey of the heart towards spiritual perfection, so that every figure in the story, as well as every event, is able to play its part in his symbolic representation of the spiritual journey: Joseph is the heart (*qalb*), Jacob reason (*'aql*), Potiphar the spirit (*ruh*), and Zolaykā the blaming self (*nafs-e lawwāma*), and so on (Kāšāni, I, pp. 316-17). Joseph's imprisonment and subsequent release represent the heart's attainment of perfection and the state of annihilation from self (*fanā*), and subsistence in God (*baqā*), respectively. Kāšāni's commentary, by comparison with those of earlier Sufis, is highly analytical and almost philosophical in its approach to the story of Joseph (Kāšāni, I, pp. 321-23).

INDEPENDENT COMMENTARIES

The genre of independent commentaries on *Surat Yusuf*, which may first have emerged in the mid to late 11th century, deserves investigation in its own right. It displays a variety of different approaches and literary styles and includes several interesting works that remain only in manuscript. These commentaries seem to fall into two categories. There are firstly those that may be described as "verse-by-verse" commentaries on *Surat Yusuf*, with a great



deal of additional material relating more or less directly to subject matter raised by the story. To this category belongs *al-Settin al-jāme' le-laṭā'ef al-basātin* of Aḥmad b. Moḥammad b. Zayd Ṭusi (fl. 11th cent.), the *Baḥr al-maḥabba* attributed to Aḥmad Ġazālī (d. 1126), a short commentary attributed to Sebt b. Jawzi (d. 1256; British Library, Add 25,755, no. 2 entitled *Qeṣṣat Yusof 'alayh al-salām*, and the *Ḥadā'eq al-ḥaqā'eq* of Mo'in-al-Din Farāhi Heravi (d. 1502). Secondly, there are commentaries which are focused on other verses of the Qur'ān, but are interwoven with verses and excerpts from the story of Joseph. The latter category is represented by several works, including the *Zahr al-kemām* of Abu Ḥafs 'Omar Awṣi (fl. 1284), an anonymous manuscript in the British Library (OR 11527), and possibly by the manuscript Paris 1296 (Brockelmann, II, p. 265, Suppl., I, pp. 378, 919).

In the first category, the most substantial independent commentary in Arabic (numbering 164 pages in the Bombay edition) is the *Baḥr al-maḥabba fī asrār al-mawadda fī tafsīr Surat Yusof*, which is also known by the titles *Tafsīr Surat Yusof al-mosammā be-dorrat al-bayzā'*, *Baḥr al-eṣq fī tafsīr Surat Yusof*, and simply *Tafsīr Surat Yusof* (Lumbard, p. 28). The attribution of this work to Aḥmad Ġazālī has recently been questioned by Joseph Lumbard, who considers it to be of later authorship (Lumbard, pp. 28-29). The content of the commentary is broader in scope than is indicated by some of its titles. Although love certainly features, the work discusses many other subjects of religious, spiritual, and theological significance. The commentary is not arranged in chapters, but material is loosely highlighted under subtitles such as *faṣl* (section), *qeṣṣa* (story), *nokta* (remark), and *eṣāra* (allusion, point). It includes sayings of earlier mystics, such as Abu'l-Qāsem Jonayd, Ḥosayn b. Maṣṣūr Ḥallāj (q.v.), Abu Moḥammad Sahl Tostari, and Abu 'Alī Daqqāq, numerous anecdotes, Hadiths, poetry, and passages of rhyming prose.

A shorter work is the *Qeṣṣat Yusof 'alayh al-salām* attributed to Sebt b. Jawzi (d. 1200), numbering less than 70 folios, which may more strictly be described as a commentary on the story of Joseph, with the addition of traditional narrative material, relevant Hadiths, and some comments drawing religious and ethical lessons from the story. The work includes some passages of rhyming prose and poetry.

In Persian, *al-Settin al-jāme' le-laṭā'ef al-basātin* of Aḥmad b. Moḥammad Ṭusi, is possibly the earliest independent commentary of *Surat Yusof*. Previously Moḥammad Mo'in (pp. 319-23) and the commentary's editor Moḥammad Rowšan (Ṭusi, editor's intro. p. 11), on the basis of the style and content of the



work, had considered it to date from the mid- to late 6th/12th century. However, Moḥammad-Rezā Šafi'i Kadkani has since argued that Ṭusi composed the work between 460 and 470 (1067-77), and considers it to be an important source for our knowledge of the development of the earliest mystic poetry in Persian (Kadkani, p. 343). The commentary is systematically divided into sixty chapters, each taking its lead from a particular verse of *Surat Yusof*. The prose includes some examples of rhyming prose, and a good deal of poetry. Apart from narrative passages, the content is largely homiletic, and includes discussions of many subjects of religious and spiritual import, with a strong emphasis on love. It is a lengthy work, running to over 700 pages in its published edition.

Another substantial Persian work in the first category of independent commentaries is the much later *Ḥadā'eq al-ḥaqā'eq* of Mo'in-al-Din Farāhi Heravi (d. 1502). This commentary is not as systematically arranged as *al-Settin*, but it is divided into numerous subsections, not always entitled *faṣl*. Some indicate that they contain subtleties (*laṭā'ef*) and allusions (*ešārāt*) concerning a particular verse, and others indicate a return the story after an excursus (*raja'nā ela'l-qeṣṣa*). The homiletic prose is for the most part plain with very little use of rhyming prose, but there is an abundant use of poetry.

In the second category of independent commentaries, the *Zahr al-kemām fi qeṣṣat Yusof 'alayh al-salām* by Serāj-al-Din Abu Šafā 'Omar Awsi (fl. 1284) appears to be a popular work, having been published twice (Egypt, 1922-23; Beirut, 2003), while poems from the work have been translated into English (Nemoy, 1930). The present writer has examined the work in two manuscripts, one at the British Library (OR 11246), dated 1002/1593-94, and another at Cambridge University Library (Arberry's catalogue, no. 1417; for other MSS see Brockelmann, II, p. 265, Suppl., p. 378). The *Zahr al-kemām* is arranged in seventeen sessions (*majāles*), each of which is based on the commentary on a particular verse of the Qur'ān, and includes a passage relating to the story of Joseph. For example, the first session (*laṭā'ef*) begins with an exposition of the meaning of verse 23 in *Surat al-osarā'*, but eventually moves on to an account of the birth of Jacob and Esau and Joseph's early childhood. Two other works, apparently following a similar arrangement, are an incomplete British Library manuscript (OR 11527) and the *al-Majāles al-Yusofiya* (Paris, 1296).



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