

Research Article

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A Historical-Contextualist Approach to the Joseph Chapter of the Qur'an

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2022-0213>

received May 12, 2022; accepted August 08, 2022

Abstract: This article applies a historical-contextualist approach to analyzing the Joseph *sūra* of the Qur'an. It first explores the theoretical framework of this study and introduces the historical-contextualist methodology employed and then provides a brief explanation of the Qur'anic account of the story of Joseph. The Joseph *sūra* is analyzed in light of the context of its revelation and the use it makes of fundamental Qur'anic teachings. This article demonstrates that the revelation of the *sūra* of Joseph was closely related to the sociopolitical context in which Muhammad and the Muslims lived, and that the *sūra* highlights several fundamental theological teachings of the Qur'an, including God's unity and omnipotence, revelation and prophethood, and the afterlife, all themes emphasized in earliest *sūras* of the Qur'an including those revealed before the Joseph *sūra*.

Keywords: Qur'an, historical-contextualist approach, Joseph *sūra*

1 Introduction

The twelfth chapter (*sūra*) of the Qur'an is named after Joseph (Yūsuf). This *sūra* has some distinctive characteristics. First, the structure of the Qur'anic account of Joseph's life is different from that of other Biblical figures mentioned in the Qur'an. Unlike other Biblical prophets who are mentioned throughout the Qur'an, the story of Joseph is a complete narrative and is contained in one *sūra* – the twelfth in the Qur'an. Apart from this chapter, Joseph is only mentioned in two other verses of the Qur'an. These two verses do not deal with the details of Joseph's life: in Q 6:84, Joseph is described as one of the pious descendants of Abraham, and in Q 40:34, Joseph is reported to have been doubted during his lifetime by people despite offering clear proofs. Second, unlike other chapters of the Qur'an that include discussion of multiple issues, the Joseph *sūra* is the only *sūra* of any length which is dedicated to a single subject. Third, the Qur'anic account of Joseph is the most comprehensive description in the Qur'an of any Biblical figure, as Stern notes.¹ Finally, this *sūra* is one of the few *sūras* named after an individual (the few other *sūras* that are named after prophets include Yunus, Ibrahim, Muhammad, Maryam, and Nuh).

A number of scholars have explored the Joseph *sūra* from different angles. Annabel Keeler discusses some commentaries on the *sūra* available in Arabic and Persian sources.² Some scholars have mentioned the parallels that are found between the Qur'anic account of Yusuf and the Biblical account and other Jewish sources such as Midrash. In particular, Western scholars of the twentieth century often used such

1 Stern, "Muhammad and Joseph," 193.

2 Keeler, "Joseph ii. In Qur'anic Exegesis."

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parallels to suggest that certain elements of the Qur'an were borrowed from the Bible and later Jewish texts.³ Stern explores the *sūra* in light of Muhammad's prophetic mission, arguing that a "careful exegesis of this story... provide[s] an insight into the Prophet's developing consciousness of the role he was to play in the divine plan."⁴ Among Muslim scholars, some like Abdel Haleem have compared the Joseph narrative in the Qur'an and the Bible in order to discuss their different structures and motifs, or the purpose for conveying such a narrative in each source, respectively.⁵ Mustansir Mir takes a literary approach to the *sūra*, arguing that it "presents a set of interrelated themes using a tightly-knit plot and employing a variety of characters in a state of dynamic interaction."⁶ Iranian scholar Abdolkarim Soroush uses the *sūra* in order to further strengthen his theory of revelation, according to which prophets received revelations in the form of "dream" (*ru'yā*).⁷ Finally, Louay Fatoohi takes a comparative approach, seeking to argue for "authenticity" of the Qur'anic account, while suggesting the Biblical account has certain "shortcomings."⁸

This article takes a different approach to the Joseph *sūra*. Drawing on the contextualist approach to interpreting the Qur'an presented by Fazlur Rahman (d.1988) and developed by Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (d.2010), Amina Wadud, and Abdolkarim Soroush, to name a few, this article argues that the Qur'anic account of the story of Joseph is closely relevant to the context of its revelation. Further, rather than taking a comparative approach seeking to explore the similarities and differences between Qur'anic and Biblical accounts to indicate which account is more authentic, or considering whether the Biblical figure of Joseph was a "historical" person who actually lived in a particular point of history,⁹ the present article explores the Qur'anic account in light of the fundamental theological teachings of the Qur'an which have been emphasized in the Meccan verses of the Qur'an – especially those revealed before the Joseph *sūra*.

2 Contextualist approaches to the Qur'an

Contextualist approaches to the Qur'an and the use of critical–historical methodology to read the text have their roots in Western scholarship on the Qur'an from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Western scholars of the late nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century took a historical approach to the Qur'an, seeking to establish a link between the content of the Qur'an and its immediate societal and cultural context. This approach to the religious scriptures has its roots in the era of the Enlightenment and critical–historical methodological approaches to Biblical study. As Morteza Karimi-Nia notes, the "historical approach to [the] study of religions and their scriptures is a relatively modern phenomenon and dates back to less than three centuries ago."¹⁰ In the context of Biblical studies, the German commentator Johann Salomo Semler (d.1791) "called for a purely historical-philological interpretation of the Bible, in the light of the circumstances surrounding it."¹¹

A similar approach was adopted by many Western scholars of the Qur'an in the twentieth century. Alongside their attempts to identify sources of the Qur'an and contextualize Qur'anic teachings within the Late Antiquity and pre-Islamic Arabian contexts, many such scholars postulated a close link between

³ Macdonald, "Joseph in the Qur'an; Rosenthal, *Judaism and Islam*," 15–6.

⁴ Stern, "Muhammad and Joseph," 193.

⁵ Haleem, "The Story of Joseph," 171–91.

⁶ Mir, "The Qur'anic Story of Joseph," 15. See also Mir's exploration of Islahi's approach: Mir, "Why Did the Egyptian Noble-Women Cut Their Hands?," 619.

⁷ Soroush, *Kalam-e Muhammad, ru'ya-ye Muhammad*. For Soroush's theory see: Akbar, "Abdolkarim Soroush's Theory of Revelation," 19–42.

⁸ Fatoohi, *The Prophet Joseph in the Qur'an*, 235–45.

⁹ For example, see *Ibid.*, 208–17.

¹⁰ Karimi-Nia, "The Historiography of the Qur'an," 48.

¹¹ Rippin, *Muslims*, 248.

Muhammad's personality and the events that took place during his prophetic career on the one hand and the content of the Qur'an on the other. Needless to say, this approach did not presuppose a revelatory status for the Qur'an. In this sense, Ignaz Goldziher (d.1921) sought to account for the difference between "the style and rhetoric" of the Meccan and Medinan *sūras* of the Qur'an in light of the Prophet's migration from Mecca to Medina and the new circumstances encountered by the Muslim community in the latter city.¹² Goldziher also argued that Qur'anic polemics against Jews, which appeared in Medinan verses of the Qur'an, reflect the historical context of Muhammad's confrontation with the Jews of Medina.¹³ Later, William Montgomery Watt (d.2006) emphasized that the Qur'an was closely connected to the development of Muhammad's prophetic career, its societal context, and the community to which it was addressed. For him, the Qur'an was influenced by "the intellectual and cultural outlook of the community to which it... [was] addressed, and in which the prophet share[d]."¹⁴

The connection between the content of the Qur'an and the incidents of Muhammad's prophetic career was described by some medieval Muslim scholars in what they referred to as *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation) literature. The two famous volumes of this genre were written by al-Wāḥidī al-Nīshābūrī (d.1075) and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d.1505). In these books, many reports and historical material relevant to selected passages of the Qur'an were collected together. However, it should be noted that *asbāb* material is different from the approach of Western scholarship. When it comes to the notion of "context," the *asbāb* material is limited to "occasions" and not "causes" of revelation. As Kenneth Cragg states, "traditional *tafsīr* has always held the *asbāb* in the *nuzūl* to be 'occasions' and not 'causes', or at least not 'causes' in the sense that the text is 'necessitated' by any time or place, seeing that it is inviolate already in heaven."¹⁵ This approach was used in a work from the fifth Islamic century entitled *Kitāb al-mabānī li-naẓm al-ma'ānī*, whose author stated that "the Qur'ān was revealed according to the needs of the situation," nevertheless "the arrangement of the text as it stands today mirrors that found in the eternal 'heavenly tablet.'"¹⁶ This means that for many classical exegetes, the Qur'anic verses that were revealed to the Prophet after certain historical events did not depend upon their *sabab* in the way that the existence of an effect depends on that of its cause – an idea which makes *asbāb* literature distinct from a Western historical-critical approach to the Qur'an. Indeed, in contrast to Western approaches, many Muslim scholars have been reluctant to trace the influence of context upon the Qur'an. As Farid Esack noted, this reluctance "is a direct consequence of the passionate commitment to the preservation of the Otherness of the Qur'an as God's speech."¹⁷ Mun'im Sirry states that most Muslim scholars "do not welcome the emphasis on the environmental influence on the Qur'an as it implies that the Qur'an is of human rather than divine origin."¹⁸ Similarly, Karimi-Nia notes that, for many Muslims, "the holy text is timeless. Its divine status means that it exists independently of temporal constraints... [including] of time and location."¹⁹

Despite the continued prevalence of this attitude to the text of the Qur'an, especially in traditional circles, from the second half of the twentieth century until today, some Muslim scholars have contended that an intimate connection does indeed exist between the content of the Qur'an and the historical context in which it emerged, emphasizing the human or historical aspect of revelation. This line of scholarship among Muslim thinkers has been referred to as "contextualization."²⁰ One scholar who adopted this approach in his work was Fazlur Rahman. Arguing that the Qur'an is "God's response through Muhammad's mind... to a historic situation," Rahman proposed that the revelation of the Qur'an took place

¹² Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology*, 10.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Watt, *Islam and Christianity Today*, 66.

¹⁵ Cragg, "The Historical Geography of the Qur'ān," 82.

¹⁶ Rippin, "Occasions of Revelation," 569.

¹⁷ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 53.

¹⁸ Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics*, 63.

¹⁹ Karimi-Nia, "The Historiography of the Qur'an," 48.

²⁰ Kersten, *Contemporary Thought in the Muslim World*, 65–7; see also Saeed, *Reading the Qur'an*.

in a concrete historical situation which reflected the circumstances of the seventh-century Arabian society and the Prophet's first audience.²¹ That is, the Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad in reaction to numerous socio-historical occurrences that took place in a certain period of time. Thus, the Qur'an took shape "in the light of history and against a social-historical background."²² Such an approach has been adopted by other Muslim scholars.²³ Like Rahman, who believed that the Qur'an has both divine and human nature,²⁴ many of these contextualist scholars have ascribed significant human and historical characteristics to the Qur'an, without denying the Qur'an's divine origin.

Contextualist Muslim scholars have sought to apply this approach particularly to the verses of the Qur'an with socio-legal content, arguing that the rulings they contain are chiefly relevant to the Arabian society of the seventh century. It has been argued that much of the Qur'an's legislation, including *hudud* punishments, should not be implemented during the modern period²⁵ and that the precepts related to women's rights and family issues are not applicable today given the change of context and role of women in the contemporary world.²⁶

In advocating for reform to Qur'anic legislation, some contextualist Muslim scholars have argued that the Qur'an should be treated holistically in line with its *Weltanschauung* or world view. Thus, instead of reading Qur'anic verses – especially those related to socio-legal matters – in isolation from the Qur'an's fundamental themes or in an "atomistic" way, they should be interpreted in light of these fundamental features.²⁷ For example, Rahman criticizes the traditionalist approaches which seek to "select certain verses from the Qur'an to project a partial and subjective point of view."²⁸ Rahman argues that the Qur'an's emphasis on justice is a fundamental feature of the text – a feature which gives the Qur'an "a certain unity" – and thus the verses related to socio-legal matters should be interpreted in light of this emphasis.²⁹ Another scholar, Amina Wadud, who coined the term "*tawhidic* paradigm," argues that the notion of *tawhid* (unity of God) supports an egalitarian reading of the Qur'an. Central to her thesis is the idea that "since God is the highest conceptual aspect of all, then no person can be greater than another person, especially for mere reasons of gender, race, class, nationality, etc."³⁰ Thus, discrimination based on gender and the notion of men's superiority over women go against the Qur'an's monotheistic outlook.³¹ Wadud concludes that men and women have the same status in God's eyes.³² Therefore, those Qur'anic verses which seem at first glance to discriminate against women must be reinterpreted in light of the context of their revelation and in light of the Qur'an's emphasis on *tawhid* and equality among humans.

²¹ Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 8.

²² Ibid., 5.

²³ For example, see: Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*; Abu Zayd, *Critique of Religious Discourse*; Al-Jabiri, *Democracy, Human Rights and Law*; Shabestari, "Qera'at-e nabavi az jahan." Fazlur Rahman is also well known for presenting the double-movement theory, which includes two movements in interpreting the Qur'an. The first movement includes an examination of the immediate context of revelation, which enables interpreters to understand Qur'anic verses in light of the historical context of their revelation and thus understand the original intention behind them. These original intentions form the basis of the universal principles of the Qur'an. In the second movement, the universal principle achieved in the first movement should be used as a basis for formulating laws related to the contemporary situation. Given that the second movement is more relevant to verses of the Qur'an with legal tones, this article focuses on the first movement. For Fazlur Rahman's approach and his influence on the generation of Muslim scholars who followed him, see: Akbar, "Fazlur Rahman's Influence on Contemporary Islamic Thought."

²⁴ Rahman, *Islam*, 33.

²⁵ See, for example, Al-Jabiri, *Democracy, Human Rights and Law*, 84–5; Yousefi-Eshkevari, "Huquq-e bashar va ahkam-e ejtemai-e Islam."

²⁶ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*; and Barlas, "*Believing Women*" in *Islam*.

²⁷ See Rahman, *Islam & Modernity*, 2–3; Barlas, "*Believing Women*" in *Islam*, 17; and Wadud, "Qur'an, Gender and Interpretive Possibilities," 327.

²⁸ Rahman, *The Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 15.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Wadud, "Foreword: Engaging Tawhid in Islam and Feminisms," 437.

³¹ Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 32.

³² Wadud, "Foreword: Engaging Tawhid in Islam and Feminisms," 437.

Despite the implementation of such approaches, i.e., contextualization and reading the Qur'an holistically in light of its central features, to the socio-legal verses of the Qur'an, Muslim contextualist scholars have not yet expanded their methodologies to other Qur'anic passages, such as narratives. Taking the Joseph *sūra* as an example, I offer a contextualist analysis of the *sūra*. My central questions concern the extent to which we can link the *sūra* to the context of its revelation, how the *sūra* can be analyzed in light of the fundamental theological teachings of the Qur'an emphasized in early and mid-Meccan periods of revelation, and what messages the *sūra* seeks to convey to the immediate addressees of Muhammad.³³

3 Muhammad Khalafallah's literary approach

Before proceeding, I would emphasize that my approach to the Joseph *sūra* is also in line with the work of Egyptian scholar Muhammad Khalafallah's (d.1998) understanding of Qur'anic narratives. Khalafallah was one of the Muslim scholars in the twentieth century who took a literary approach to the Qur'an, differentiating between "history" (*tārikh*) and "literature" (*adab*). As noted by Mohammad Salama, central to Khalafallah's thesis was a distinction between "historical authenticity and the artistic nature of some of the events mentioned in the Qur'an."³⁴ Khalafallah argued that Qur'anic narratives should not be approached as historical reports of events that took place at particular places and times. He rejected early Western approaches to Qur'anic stories, arguing that "the intent of the Qur'an in the narratives was nothing but admonition (*'ibra*) and exhortation (*'izza*) and never was instruction in history or explication of its truth."³⁵ Khalafallah's thesis did not seek to question the revelatory nature of the Qur'an, but quite the contrary; he sought to defend the Qur'an against the claim of Western scholars that it does not report historical events accurately. Accordingly, he claimed that if some view Qur'anic narratives such as *aṣḥāb al-kaḥf* as mythological, this does not weaken the Qur'an, since this "is one of the characteristics of world literature as well as of the texts of the great religions." Muslims, he suggested, can be "proud that the Qur'an has pioneered in setting the standards and measures by which the material can be appreciated."³⁶

The suggestion that Khalafallah's approach questioned the divine origin of the Qur'an was evident from the very first reactions to his idea. Some of the academics examining Khalafallah's thesis rejected it based on the idea that his approach distinguished between historical facts and stories in the Qur'an, and this by its nature challenged the "truths" of the Qur'an or even its divine nature.³⁷ Abu Zayd observed that opposition to Khalafallah's thesis was grounded in "a battle over whether to interpret religious texts through the instruments of human reason based in history... [or by] metaphysical thinking steeped in superstition and myth" – a battle being fought, not only in Khalafallah's own Egyptian society, but also in many other Muslim-majority societies.³⁸

As we have seen, taking a literary approach to interpreting the Qur'an sometimes leads to controversy among Muslims and the opposition of a number of scholars, especially from the traditionalist camp. Here, a key claim in the debate is that "the stories of the Qur'an do not present actual historical facts," an idea which could even amount to apostasy, since it appears to question the divine nature of the Qur'an by placing it "in a lower position than a book of history."³⁹ This criticism is reminiscent of the critique leveled by some Muslim scholars at the contextualist approach to the Qur'an which – it is claimed – downplays the text's divine status.⁴⁰

³³ In order to be faithful to a historical-contextualist reading of the Joseph *sūra*, I will mainly focus on those verses revealed before (or almost contemporaneously with) the revelation of this *sūra*.

³⁴ Salama, *The Qur'an and Modern Arabic Literary Criticism*, 53.

³⁵ Haddad, *Contemporary Islam*, 47.

³⁶ Cited in *Ibid.*, 49.

³⁷ Abu Zayd, *Critique of Religious Discourse*, 30.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Abu Zayd, "The Dilemma of the Literary Approach to the Qur'an," 9.

⁴⁰ For example, see al-Azami, *The History of the Qur'anic Text*, 318; and Akhtar, *The Quran and the Secular Mind*, 28.

My approach to the Joseph *sūra* in the Qur'an, as will be demonstrated below, is consistent with the contextualist literary understanding of the text presented by Khalafallah. In keeping with the contextualist methodology set out earlier, whether the events described in the Joseph *sūra* refer to actual historical occurrences is irrelevant to my analysis.

4 The Joseph *sūra*

The account of Joseph's story begins from the fourth verse of the Joseph *sūrah* and ends in verse 101. It opens with Joseph telling his father Jacob about a dream he had and Jacob warning him not to tell his brothers. Joseph describes seeing eleven stars along with the sun and the moon prostrating themselves to him in his dream (12:4–5). Jacob tells Joseph that God has chosen him as He had earlier favored Abraham and Isaac (12:6). The Qur'an reports that Joseph's brothers are jealous and Jacob prefers Joseph and Benjamin to them (12:8). They decide to kill Joseph, but one of the brothers suggests they throw him into a well instead (12:9–10). The brothers convince Jacob to let Joseph accompany them on an outing the next day (12:11–14).

The Qur'an explains that after throwing him into a well (12:15), Joseph's brothers return to their father announcing Joseph has been devoured by a wolf (12:16–17), staining his shirt with false blood (12:18). Joseph is rescued by some travelers, sold at a cheap price (12:19–20) and taken to Egypt (12:21). The Qur'an does not mention the name of the person who purchased Joseph, but Muslim commentators, like the Biblical account, identify him as Potiphar.⁴¹ When Joseph reaches the age of maturity, Potiphar's wife attempts to seduce him. Joseph resists and attempts to escape outside, but the woman tears his shirt from behind (12:22–25).⁴² Joseph's innocence is immediately proven by a witness (12:25–29). Later, in response to city gossip, Potiphar's wife invites her friends to a banquet to admire Joseph's beauty (12:30–32).⁴³ However, he resists the women and announces that he would prefer to be thrown in prison than fall into temptation (12:33). In prison, he interprets two prisoners' dreams, asking the one whose release he foretells to mention his name to the king, but the prisoner forgets the request (12:41–42). After some years, the king dreams that seven fat cows are devoured by seven lean cows and seven green ears of corn by seven dry ones, but no one is able to interpret his dream. The released convict then remembers Joseph (40:43–45), who subsequently interprets the king's dream as a forecast of seven normal years followed by seven years of famine and then one year of plenty (12:47–49).

The king summons Joseph after hearing his interpretation, but Joseph insists his innocence be proven first. Upon his release, the king appoints Joseph custodian of the granaries of Egypt (12:51–55). The Qur'an mentions nothing of the first seven years, turning directly to the years of famine. Facing scarcity, Joseph's brothers, without their youngest brother, come to Egypt in search of food. The brothers do not recognize Joseph, but he recognizes them (12:58). Joseph gives them provisions, but tells them their youngest brother must accompany them if any further request is to be granted (12:59–60). Joseph also orders their payment be put back in their saddlebags, and the brothers return home (12:62–63). While initially rejecting the brothers' plea (12:63–64), after the money is found (12:65), Jacob agrees that the youngest brother make the second trip and elicits an oath from the brothers that they will bring him back (12:66).

On encountering the brothers again, Joseph reveals his identity to his youngest brother (12:69). He provides his brothers with provisions and hides the king's drinking cup in his youngest brother's bag. The brothers are told there has been thievery, and Joseph himself searches their bags, finding the missing cup

⁴¹ See Tabari, *The History of Tabari*, 153.

⁴² Unlike the Qur'an, there is no suggestion in the Bible that Joseph experienced desire for the woman. However, such a passage is found in a post-Biblical text named Bereshit Rabbah. See Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet*, 102.

⁴³ There is no mention of this event in the Bible, but one Jewish legend mentions the feast in which women cut their hands in surprise at Joseph's handsomeness (see Macdonald, "Joseph in the Qur'an," 128; and Rosenthal, *Judaism and Islam*, 16).

where he had put it. Joseph holds Benjamin and rejects the brothers' plea that one of them stay instead (12:76–79); the eldest brother waits in Egypt nonetheless (12:80) while the remaining brothers return. Jacob is blinded by this time due to extreme grief for Joseph (12:84–85) and sends the brothers in search of Joseph and his brother (12:87). In Egypt, Joseph first reminds his brothers of what they did to him and Benjamin and then reveals his identity (12:89–90). Joseph forgives his brothers, asks them to put his shirt on Jacob's face to restore his sight, and summons the entire family (12:92–93).

The Qur'an does not detail how the brothers return to their homeland and bring Jacob to Egypt. It does explain that Jacob smells Joseph before they enter Egypt (12:94), and that Jacob regains his vision after Joseph's shirt is put on his face (12:96). The entire family then come to Egypt and Joseph embraces his parents. They prostrate themselves before him and Joseph claims that his dream is fulfilled (12:99–100). The Qur'anic account of the story ends at this point and, unlike the Biblical version, there is no mention of Jacob's and Joseph's deaths in Egypt.

5 A contextualist reading of the Joseph *sūra*

One key feature of the contextualist approach to the Qur'an is reading the text through the biography of the Prophet (*sira* literature) or other historical texts addressing the events that took place in Muhammad's prophetic career. This helps the interpreter understand the approximate chronology of the emergence of Qur'anic verses or chapters, since the Qur'an was not revealed to the Prophet in the same order that exists today. This approach assumes that the *sira* literature reflects, more or less, actual events in the Prophet's life. Many Qur'anic narratives are attributed, both by Islamic tradition and Western scholarship, to the Meccan period of Muhammad's prophetic career. These narratives, especially those related to past prophets or the story of creation, must have already been known in Arabian society and many listeners were familiar with them. According to Muhammad's biographer Ibn Ishaq, when Muhammad preached in Mecca, some of his opponents referred his teachings as "stories of the past" and claimed that they would be able to tell better stories.⁴⁴ Numerous passages of the Qur'an indicate that Meccan idolaters regarded Qur'anic stories as "fables of the past generations" (6:25; 16:24) – an allegation demonstrating that Arabs had been familiar with some elements of the Qur'an's narratives even before the emergence of Islam.⁴⁵ It can thus be concluded that elements of the story of Joseph were probably familiar to some Arabs. This view is confirmed by the medieval Islamic scholars.⁴⁶

The Joseph *sūra* is considered to come from the Meccan period. Nöldeke considers it to belong to the third Meccan stage of Muhammad's prophetic career.⁴⁷ He cites the medieval Muslim scholar al-Suyuti who stated that Muhammad dispatched this *sūra* with the first men from Medina who converted near Mecca. This implies that the *sūra* seems to have been revealed before Aqaba and was recited to the first converts of Medina.⁴⁸ Muir and Blachère also consider the *sūra* to be among the late Meccan verses – in general, the latter's chronology is in broad agreement with that of Nöldeke.⁴⁹ Contemporary Muslim arrangements of the Qur'an also consider the *sūra* to have been revealed to Muhammad in Mecca, except for the al-Azhar *muṣḥaf*, which categorizes its first three verses as Medinan, as Mahmoud Ramyar notes.⁵⁰ Given the revelation of the *sūra* in Mecca, a brief explanation of Muhammad's prophetic career in Mecca is relevant here, especially since my approach is historical.

⁴⁴ Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, 135–6.

⁴⁵ See also Stern, "Muhammad and Joseph," 193.

⁴⁶ Qur'anic interpreter Zamakhshari reports that a group of Meccan Jews urged idolaters to test Muhammad by asking him to explain in detail how the family of Joseph left their native city and came to reside in Egypt (see Goldman, "Joseph," 56).

⁴⁷ Nöldeke et al., *The History of the Qur'ān*, 124.

⁴⁸ See also Stern, "Muhammad and Joseph," 204.

⁴⁹ For chronology of the Qur'an among Muslim and non-Muslim scholars, see Ramyar, *Tarikh-e Qur'an*, 671.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 670.

Muhammad's public preaching did not begin immediately after he received his first revelations. According to the *sira* literature, his preaching remained limited to his immediate family members for three years.⁵¹ According to Ibn Ishaq, after Muhammad began to preach his religion publicly, he did not encounter significant opposition from Meccan idolaters until "he spoke disparagingly of their gods."⁵² Tensions between Muhammad and Meccan idolaters eventually increased. Muhammad and his opponents had two different understandings of God; Muhammad emphasized the unity of God, criticizing the idolaters for worshipping God through idols. Another point of difference which I shall discuss later was the prophethood of Muhammad. The Meccans claimed that Muhammad was a soothsayer or magician-sorcerer and consequently considered the Qur'an as produced by Muhammad himself or an assistant (see 37:15; 38:4; 52:29–30; 69:41–42).⁵³ Further, Muhammad's opponents did not accept the notion of resurrection (37:16–17), which was one of the fundamental theological teachings of the Qur'an and is found among the earliest verses and *sūras* revealed to Muhammad.

The tensions between Muhammad and the Meccans do not seem to have been confined to theological matters. According to Watt, the leaders of Quraysh, the tribe of Muhammad, believed that if Muhammad's claim of prophethood was considered serious, this would have negative political and economic implications for them.⁵⁴ After failing to persuade Muhammad to stop preaching his message, Quraysh leaders embarked upon a series of social pressures, an economic boycott, and even physical force against the new Muslims.⁵⁵ This culminated in the exclusion of Muslims from the commercial life of Mecca through a ruling that "no one should either buy from them or sell to them."⁵⁶ The death of Abu Talib, Muhammad's uncle and one of the leaders of Quraysh who stood like a "tribal shield" between Muhammad and his opponents, to use Francis Peters' words, resulted in the Prophet and Muslims' loss of "conditional protection."⁵⁷ Accordingly, the conflict between Muhammad and his opponents, especially his uncle Abu Lahab, intensified significantly between 619 and 622 (when Muhammad migrated to Medina).

The last three years of Muhammad's prophetic career in Mecca were very hard for Muslims since they experienced persecution and were often exiled from the tribes to which they belonged.⁵⁸ It was under these circumstances that the idea of migration may have come to Muhammad's mind, since by this time, he would have most probably reached the conclusion that he could no longer preach his religion in Mecca. Muhammad met a number of people from Yathrib in 620 who are considered the first converts from Medina. In the following year, as reported by Ibn Ishaq, twelve people came from Medina and embraced Islam in a place near Mecca named Aqaba (this is often referred to as the First Aqaba Pledge).⁵⁹ This was then followed by the Second Aqaba Pledge in 622 when seventy-five people from Medina met Muhammad secretly and pledged their support to him, inviting him to Medina.

The text of the Joseph *sūra* closely reflects the hostile conditions in which Muslims lived in the late Meccan period. Given that the *sūra* was reported to have been revealed in the late Meccan period of Muhammad's prophetic career and was recited to the first converts from Medina, it can be stated that, as previously noted, Muhammad may have already decided that he should leave Mecca. The Joseph *sūra* also incorporates the theme of migration, highlighting that Joseph encountered strong hostility from his family members. Due to his life being under threat because of the plots of his brothers against him, God makes a plan for Joseph, as His prophet, to leave his hometown by caravan. After leaving his hometown and while resident in Egypt, Joseph never stops spreading his monotheistic beliefs even under difficult conditions,

⁵¹ Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, 117.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 118.

⁵³ *Sūras* 52 and 69, according to Nöldeke's chronology, belonged to first Meccan period and *sūras* 37 and 38 belonged to the second Meccan period.

⁵⁴ Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, 135; and Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam*, 116–7.

⁵⁵ Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, 143.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁵⁷ Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam*, 179.

⁵⁸ Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, 212.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 197–9.

such as in jail. The message of the *sūra* for the addressees of the Prophet and his followers was that Muhammad may similarly leave his hometown and continue to preach his religious beliefs in another city. It reminded them that migration for Muhammad, as for Joseph, does not represent any significant break from his religious beliefs. In this sense, the *sūra* was also relevant to the first Medinan converts, given that it could aptly justify to them why a prophet may decide to leave his hometown and migrate to another city which could better facilitate the spread of his message.⁶⁰

The *sūra* was revealed in circumstances in which Muhammad faced strong resistance from the people of Mecca to his religious convictions. Given the context of its revelation, the *sūra* at times reflects similar hostility and enmity being directed at Joseph by his brothers. For example, as noted by Anthony Johns, Joseph's imprisonment is reminiscent of the restrictions facing Muhammad and his followers and the boycott against them in Mecca.⁶¹ Stern's theory of the likeness between Muhammad and Joseph is also relevant here. Both Muhammad and Joseph were accused of seeking superiority over "others" (Muhammad's opponents and Joseph's brothers, respectively) for their own personal goals, and in both cases, the "others" could not believe that each prophet had a "special" position (12:8).⁶²

Pre-Islamic Arabs believed that human beings can communicate with supernatural beings such as jinn and angels. Owing to their familiarity with such communicative interactions, they could accept the possibility of such communication between the Prophet and the angel.⁶³ Accordingly, they did not reject the phenomenon of Qur'anic revelation itself (*nuzūl al-Qur'an*); rather, they raised objections to its recipient, i.e., Muhammad, meaning that they challenged Muhammad's "special" position. The Joseph *sūra* reflects such hostility toward another prophet of God, i.e., Joseph, conveying a message for the addressees of the Prophet that the difficulties Muhammad and his community confronted were not unprecedented, and that other prophets encountered various levels of enmity even at the hands of their close relatives. This later point is especially relevant for Muhammad as he faced strong hostility from his own relatives, including his uncle Abu Lahab.

One of the most important functions of the Joseph *sūra* that was relevant to the Prophet's addressees and the hostile conditions in which they found themselves is the message of fortitude and hope that the *sūra* seeks to convey. The *sūra* invites the followers of Muhammad and his small community to maintain their strength and asserts they would retain God's favor during their hardship. This message is stressed toward the later parts of the *sūra*. Despite all the difficulties that Joseph encounters, not only in his hometown, but also after his arrival to Egypt, when he was imprisoned there for many years, he eventually gains a position of ascendancy. Joseph is finally recognized as the prophet of God by the people of the city and even by the brothers who had displayed hostility to him in his hometown. Joseph's brothers accept his "special" position in God's eyes, confessing that they erred (12:91). That is, even those relatives of Joseph who once attempted to kill him are reported here to have been driven by their "ignorance" (12:89) and finally acknowledge Joseph's prophethood and are reconciled with him. More importantly, when Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers, the Qur'an emphasizes that those believers who are patient in hardship will always be rewarded: "he who fears God and is patient, then indeed, God does not allow to be lost the reward of those who do good" (12:90).

In this, the Qur'an presents Joseph as a role model for the addressees of the Prophet. As Abdel Haleem notes, "Joseph in the Qur'an is not just a pleasant, handsome, gifted and able Hebrew economist who played an important role in the history of his nation, but a prophet whose story offers permanent universal guidance to believers."⁶⁴ One key purpose of the *sūra* is to show how believers should act in certain circumstances. They should never lose hope in God and can pray to Him for help during life's difficult situations, as Joseph himself did (12:33).

⁶⁰ See also Stern, "Muhammad and Joseph," 202–3.

⁶¹ Johns, "Joseph in the Qur'an," 44.

⁶² Stern, "Muhammad and Joseph," 200–1.

⁶³ Abu Zayd, *Mafhum al-nass*, 34.

⁶⁴ Haleem, "The Story of Joseph in the Qur'an," 189.

Patience is a clear Meccan theme, and the Qur'an's emphasis on Joseph's patience and his eventual victory in Egypt can be interpreted in light of a number of other Qur'anic verses which, according to Nöldeke's chronology, belonged to the Meccan period (especially the second and third Meccan verses). In such verses, the Qur'an asks Muhammad to be patient with "God's decree" (76:24; see also 73:10), recommending that he "bear[s] with them [Meccan idolaters] for a little while" (73:11). Another verse asks the Prophet to "bear everything they say with patience" (50:30). Other similar verses include: "Do not let their words grieve you" (10:65), and "Are you going to abandon some part of what is revealed to you, and let your heart be oppressed by it, because they say, 'Why is no treasure sent down to him?'" (11:12). God is reported to have been aware of the harms inflicted on Muhammad and Muslims by their opponents (15:97). The emphasis on patience throughout the Joseph *sūra* can also be observed in the figure of Jacob. Jacob displayed patience after he was informed that his son Joseph had been devoured by a wolf (12:18). Here, the Qur'an reports that Jacob endured "beautiful patience" (*ṣabr al-jamīl*). When the brothers come home from Egypt for the second time, without Benjamin, he once again demonstrates patience and the Qur'an uses the same expression (12:83). Like Joseph, Jacob maintained his strength and never lost faith in the grace of God.⁶⁵ Despite all difficulties that Jacob encounters, he, like Joseph, is rewarded toward the end of the *sūra* as he regains his sight (12:96) and is reunited with his beloved son after many years (12:99).

Therefore, the message of the *sūra* was closely linked to the circumstances in which it was revealed and was relevant to the conditions of the Prophet's audiences, for both believers and disbelievers. For the believers, it invited them to be patient and maintain their strength in the difficult conditions they had experienced so far and would most probably experience in the near future. In addition, the *sūra* summons them to never lose faith in God since God's promises always come true: "my Lord is subtle in fulfilling what He wills. Surely He alone is the All-Knowing, All-Wise" (12:100). The message of the *sūra* for disbelievers and Muhammad's opponents was that they should leave their "ignorance" (12:89), consider the fate of other communities to which God sent prophets, and follow the Prophet's message: "how many signs in the heavens and the earth do they pass by with indifference! And most of them do not believe in God without associating others with Him" (12:105–106). The extent to which the Prophet's key messages are highlighted in the *sūra* is discussed in Section 6.

6 The *sūra* in light of key Qur'anic teachings

The manner in which the Joseph *sūra* highlights fundamental theological teachings of Muhammad and Islam is also relevant to the present analysis. Muhammad Mujtahed Shabestari argues in his theory of *Prophetic Reading of the World* that the Qur'an is an interpretive understanding (*fahm-e tafsīrī*) of the world by the Prophet – an understanding which essentially revolved around a monotheistic vision. In this monotheistic understanding, not only the creation of the world and all natural phenomena, such as sending down rain from the heavens and the direction of the winds and the clouds, but also historical events and the fate of human communities are attributed to God. Indeed, God is active and present in the fate and destiny of human communities.⁶⁶

While expressing the narration of Joseph, the Qur'an highlights the attributes of God. In the Joseph *sūra*, one can observe the sovereign hand of God in all human affairs. When Joseph's brothers agree to put him in the pit, God reveals to his prophet Joseph that "thou wilt tell them of this deed of theirs when they are unaware" (12:15). When the people of the caravan send their water-drawer into the pit and realize that there is a youth in it, the Qur'an says that "God is aware of what they did" (12:19). It was God who established Joseph in the land of Egypt and taught him how to interpret events (12:21). In Egypt, one can witness God's

⁶⁵ In this regard, certain elements of Job's suffering can be seen in the life of Jacob. For further similarities between Job and Jacob, see Busse, *Islam, Judaism, and Christianity*, 90.

⁶⁶ Shabestari, "Qera'at-e nabavi az jahan."

intervention in many of the events taking place. It was divine intervention which prevented Joseph from committing a sin when he desired the woman (12:24). Once again, God hears Joseph's prayers and fends off the wiles of women (12:34). After Joseph is released from prison, God gives authority and power to him. Here, the Qur'an emphasizes that God's mercy will be granted to anyone whom God wills (12:56). The Qur'an also indicates that the king's law prevents Joseph from arresting his youngest brother after the king's cup is found in his bag, but due to God's will, Joseph manages to keep Benjamin in Egypt (12:76).⁶⁷

Another message found throughout the Joseph *sūra* which is consistent with the Qur'anic account of God is that God is always victorious and helps His messengers in their struggles against those who do not have faith. Alongside an emphasis on this, the Qur'an highlights throughout the *sūra* the failure and ineffectiveness of human tricks and scams, showing that "God is able to surpass all human machinations."⁶⁸ In demonstrating that the attempt of Joseph's brothers to get rid of him was unsuccessful and in light of their eventual confession that God has preferred Joseph over his brothers (12:91), the Qur'an stresses that God not only protects his prophets and helps them in difficult conditions, but also makes others acknowledge their prophethood eventually – a point which was relevant to the people of Mecca, including Muhammad's opponents. The idea that God protects believers is highlighted throughout the Qur'an and this is one of the messages of the Qur'an indicated in Meccan *sūras* revealed to the Prophet: "Wrongdoers only have each other to protect them; the righteous have God as their protector" (45:19). Indeed, while emphasizing that believers are protected by God, the Qur'an describes those who do evil as having no one to protect them (see 11:113). It is in this sense that the Qur'an emphasizes in a second Meccan *sūra*, according to Nöldeke's chronology, that "We wrote in... [earlier] Scripture: 'My righteous servants will inherit the earth'" (21:105). God from the Qur'anic perspective is the only protector and beyond Him no one is able to find protection (18:17). This message is emphasized in other Meccan *sūras*. For example, 42:9 reads: "How can they take protectors other than Him? God alone is the Protector" (see also 17:97; 42:31; 73:9). Indeed, the Qur'an likens those who "take protectors other than God" to "spiders building themselves houses," emphasizing that the spider's house "is the frailest of all houses" (29:41).⁶⁹

The Joseph *sūra* is also consistent with broader Qur'anic teachings relating to prophethood and revelation. As a prophet of God, Joseph received a dream-form revelation at an early age indicating that God had appointed him as a prophet (12:4). God's favor is reported to have been granted to Joseph as it had already been granted to Abraham and Isaac (12:6) – an idea which emphasizes that successive prophets received revelations from God. Joseph continues to receive revelations in his lifetime. He receives a revelation in the pit (12:25) and then receives "wisdom and knowledge" when he reaches the age of maturity (12:22).

This description of Joseph communicating with God is consistent with the Qur'anic understanding of revelation. According to the Qur'an, prophets were recipients of divine revelation. It is one of the emphases of earliest *sūras* of the Qur'an revealed to Muhammad that God communicated with His prophets (19:58) such as Abraham (11:69), Moses (19:52), and Lot (11:77). God's messengers are informed by Him of "what is hidden" (72:26–7). What is also emphasized from the earliest *sūras* of the Qur'an is that the content of the revelation each prophet received is consistent with that received by others. In other words, later prophets including Muhammad were not sent with radical new messages, but all delivered God's fundamental message, asking their people to believe in God (see, for example, *sūra* 71). The Qur'an indicates in one of its earliest Meccan *sūras* that the notion of the existence of the hereafter is mentioned in earlier scriptures, in particular in those of Abraham and Moses (87:17–9). Accordingly, the Qur'an sees itself as confirming (*muṣaddiq*) the revelations given to God's prophets before Muhammad – a concept emphasized in early Meccan *sūras* (87:18–19) before the revelation of the Joseph *sūra* and reemphasized in late Meccan *sūras*, those revealed almost at the same time or shortly after the Joseph *sūra* (46:12; 42:13).⁷⁰ The Qur'an

⁶⁷ Referring to verse 21 of the *sūra* which reads "God is predominant in His affairs, but most people have no awareness of it," Mir notes that the *sūra* seeks to highlight the dominance of God (Mir, "The Qur'anic Story of Joseph").

⁶⁸ Johns, "Joseph in the Qur'an," 36.

⁶⁹ Such an idea continued throughout Medinan verses (for example, see 65:3; 47:11; 22:78; 2:137; 3:149; 3:173; 4:45; 4:81; 5:55–6; 8:26).

⁷⁰ For continuity of such a concept in Medinan *sūras*, see 2:41; 3:3; 6:92; 12:111.

therefore considers that all prophets including Joseph over the course of history have emphasized God's oneness and the existence of the afterlife – the two key theological messages of Muhammad and the Qur'an which, as discussed earlier, were not acceptable to the Arabs of Mecca.

In line with the Qur'an's emphasis on the oneness of God, in the Joseph narrative, his monotheistic beliefs are given special prominence. Joseph is reported to have followed the religion (or monotheistic belief) of his forefathers, namely Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (12:6 and 12:38). At the end of the *sūra*, Joseph praises God and tells Him that He is the creator of heavens and the earth (12:101). The *sūra* introduces Joseph as a muslim (12:101), which means a true believer of God in this context. More importantly, not only does Joseph believe in God's unity and omnipotence, but he also uses every opportunity to preach and spread his religious beliefs. For example, while in prison, Joseph preaches his monotheistic beliefs to his fellow prisoners. Indeed, in the midst of the story, the Qur'an devotes four verses (12:37–40) to setting out how Joseph explained his monotheistic beliefs, asking prisoners to believe in One God: "are diverse lords better, or Allah the One, the Almighty?" (12:39). Joseph continues here: "those whom ye worship beside Him are but names which ye have named, ye and your fathers." He also emphasizes "the decision rests with God only" (12:40).

Another message that the Joseph *sūra* seeks to emphasize is the notion of the afterlife, a concept which is a fundamental message of the Qur'an in early Meccan *sūras*. Throughout the *sūra*, the addressees of the Prophet seem to be asked to pay significant attention, not only to the fact that believers are rewarded in this life, but that they will be rewarded in the afterlife. For example, Q 12:57 states, "the reward of the Hereafter is better, for those who believe and ward off (evil)." Joseph himself emphasizes that he believes in the afterlife. When in prison, Joseph says that he left the people who did not believe in God and the afterlife (12:37). Toward the end of the *sūra*, Joseph describes God as his "guardian in this world and the Hereafter" (12:101).

Therefore, one key function of the Joseph *sūra* is to highlight the key theological messages of the Qur'an. Consistent with the context in which Islam was taking shape and the community of believers was becoming familiar with key doctrines of the religion, the Qur'an highlights such doctrines by providing Muhammad's followers with a narrative. Not only did Muhammad's followers find themselves and their Prophet in conditions in which other prophets had found themselves earlier, they also could consider Muhammad's message to be in line with that of other prophets sent by God to other peoples in the past. In sum, this *sūra* demonstrates to the community of believers how Joseph as a prophet of God implemented fundamental messages of the Qur'an throughout his lifetime and how he finally managed to overcome all the difficulties he faced with the aid of God.

7 Conclusion

Drawing on a contextualist approach to interpreting the Qur'an, which links the text to the events that took place during Muhammad's prophetic career and to its fundamental teachings, this article provided a fresh account of the Joseph narrative in the Qur'an. The approach presented here does not contradict Stern's theory – which describes some similarities between Muhammad and Joseph – or that of Rahman who observes that "the Prophet's own situation is mirrored in the accounts of earlier prophets."⁷¹ This study has linked the Joseph narrative to the historical conditions Muslims encountered at the revelation of the *sūra* – that is the *sūra* was a "response" to the Prophet's community's needs and concerns, to use Rahman's expression. It also describes how the *sūra* teaches believers the fundamental theological teachings of Islam, such as the belief in One omnipotent God, the afterlife, and prophethood and revelation.

The approach presented in this article can also help put in context the differences between the Qur'anic and Biblical accounts of the Joseph narrative. In contrast to the Bible, the Qur'an does not seek to provide a

⁷¹ Rahman, *The Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 88.

historical account of what happened in terms of dates and the names of places and people in the Joseph *sūra* (as they are provided in the Bible), because they were irrelevant to the context of the revelation of the *sūra* and the concerns of Muhammad's addressees. The Qur'anic narrative stands in contrast to the Biblical account of the Joseph narrative which, according to Abdel Haleem, gives "the impression of a chronicler's function" and is part of the history of the Israelites, given it demonstrates how they came to reside in Egypt.⁷²

Although I have taken a historical approach to the *sūra* by linking it to the context of its revelation, my approach is ahistorical too in the sense that I did not aim to explore the historical veracity of the Qur'anic account of Joseph. That is, I have not sought to understand whether figures such as Jacob, Joseph, and his brothers actually existed in the history of humankind or the events described in the *sūra* reflect real historical events. Rather, I have, like Khalafallah, explored the theological function of such a narrative for the addressees of the Prophet and the key messages it delivers in light of the fundamental teachings of the Qur'an, which were important for Muhammad's audience.

The argument presented in this article can be extended to other Qur'anic narratives, including those of other Biblical figures. Sedigheh Vasmaghi notes that "the more distant we become from the Prophet's era, and from the living conditions of the Qur'an's addressees, the more difficult comprehension of the verses becomes, and the more ambiguity increases."⁷³ This is because the immediate addressees of the Qur'an were fully familiar with the context of revelation and could thus understand the intent of the Prophet's message.⁷⁴ This implies that in a context different from that of the Prophet, such as today's world, the meaning of the verses would be different. This study was an attempt to understand the theological function of the Joseph *sūra*'s revelation, and the role it played in the late Meccan context. Some of the themes emphasized throughout the *sūra*, such as the importance of patience and faith in God when encountering difficulty, could be considered among lessons that are relevant to all Muslim believers beyond the context of Qur'anic revelation.

Conflict of interest: Author states no conflict of interest.

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⁷² Haleem, "The Story of Joseph in the Qur'an," 173–4.

⁷³ Vasmaghi, *Bazkhani-e Shari'at*, 104.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

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