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Joseph in the Qur'ān, a prophetic narrative. Incidents and specific language*

Abstract

The object of the essay is prophecy in the Qur'ān, through the stories of the prophets and the language they use. Specifically, the Qur'ānic narrative and Joseph's speeches have been systematically examined, with the intention of introducing a symmetrical reading of the story between incidents and the specific language. Emphasis has been placed on the philological aspects, by focusing the analysis on the Arabic version of the Qur'ān, in order to try to draw up a personal profile of Joseph and, at the same time, to attempt to counter an approach that claims to see all the Qur'ānic envoys only in their instrumental function in the mission of Muḥammad.

Keywords

Qur'ān, prophets, Joseph, language.

Introduction

The Qur'ān certainly talks about a number of Biblical personages, mainly from the Old Testament, in addition to the so-called pre-Islamic Arabian prophets (Hūd, Šāliḥ and Shu'ayb), who belong exclusively to the Muslim tradition.¹ All of them are identified as having the same mission without any differences. Yet, not all of them have a particular narrative importance. In fact, some play a significant role in extensive portions of the Qur'ānic text, namely, the Qur'ān's

* The translation of the Qur'ānic passages are taken from Arberry's version (*The Koran interpreted*), modified when necessary. Even though the translation by Arberry is based on the verse numbering of Flügel's edition (1834), the now standard numbering system used in the Cairo edition of the Qur'an (1924) has been followed.

¹ See al-Ṭarāfi 2003: 113–24; Wheeler 2002: 63–82, 146–56; Wheeler 2006: 24–57.

narratives to which a substantial section of the text itself is dedicated, whereas others are simply mentioned by name in brief references or lists of prophets.²

The language of the Qur'ān “though virtually identical with the language of pre-Islamic poetry, has a typically religious flavour, manifesting itself in peculiarities of style and language that must have been absent in other registers”.³ As regards the accounts of the prophets, “as examples of ‘normative precedent’”,⁴ they are mainly portrayed as edifying narratives, a divine “sign” and a reminder for listeners. The Qur'ān gives evidence of this trait, for instance, at the end of the account of Joseph, when it says: “In their stories is surely a lesson to men possessed of minds; it is not a tale forged, but a confirmation of what is before it, and a distinguishing of everything, and a guidance, and a mercy to a people who believe” (Q. 12:111).⁵

Moreover, even though some of the stories could be seen as reported in detail (e.g. Moses and Mary and Jesus), all of them are not present in dedicated contexts, except for Joseph's story in Q. 12. As a matter of fact, the prophetic stories are distributed in different verses throughout the Text in a number of contexts.⁶ Besides, not always following a chronological order, albeit they mainly represent a significant segment in the Meccan sūras,⁷ they are recurrently related in series in several cases. This is also due to the distinctive organization of the Qur'ān itself that does not follow any subject or sequential design, since the Qur'ānic revelations are said to have been brought from God to Muḥammad by Gabriel at different times, in different contexts, over more than two decades. Furthermore, specific narrative parts are repeated in several sūras, with a small number of differences or additions in the story,⁸ as well as in several prophets' speeches concerning the same issue. This means that the storyline is not told episodically as in a normal style of writing. Automatically, this trait also has an influence on the language used to recount the diverse narratives, without forgetting that “their divergences, then, point to a successively changing narrative pact, to a continuing education of the listeners and the development of a moral

² Cf. e.g. Q. 3:84; 4:163; 6:84–6.

³ Versteeg 2014²: 65. Indeed, on a first reading of the Qur'ān the impression is that it is quite complicated to understand the interconnections between the different sections, in particular of the long sūras: the peculiar literary and linguistic style influences in a certain way the general textual relations. See Bousquet 1953; Gilliot 1988: 81–2; Robinson 2003²: 224–53; Wansbrough 2004: 227–46; Gwynne 2004; Farhat 2012: 209–31; Farrin 2014.

⁴ Gwynne 2004: 32.

⁵ See Schwarzbaum 1982; Norris 1983: 246–59.

⁶ A single story is the focus of only a few sūras: Q. 71, “Noah”; Q. 12, “Joseph”; Q. 28, “The Story”, tells of Moses, Aaron and Hāmān, adding an account on Korah.

⁷ See Böwering 2001: 316–35.

⁸ See e.g. the story of Šāliḥ, reported in Q. 27:45–53, which varies almost completely from the one given by the Qur'ān in other sūras; cf. Q. 7:73–9; 11:61–8; 26:141–59; 27:45–53; 54:23–31; 91:11–5.

consensus that is reflected in the texts”.⁹ As far as the recurrent repetitions are concerned, they could be legitimized by the fact that “Human beings must be constantly reminded that the coming of a prophet is not unprecedented. God has consistently sent prophets to inform them of the existence of their Creator and to remind them of their covenantal obligation to him”.¹⁰ By giving a core message, repetition highlights the prominence of the events, although in different contexts. As well as the use of stereotypical phrases, they can be intentional, with the purpose of drawing attention to different nuances of a concept. They should be seen as “a ‘re-contexting’ of the same truths rather than literal repetition”.¹¹ Both repetitions and specific stereotypical phrases underline and recall a relevant Qur’ānic detail, namely, that “Cadence and rhythm require a generous amount of repetition. Such repetition aids fluency and serves as a mnemonic that assists oral recitation and memorization”.¹² On the contrary, a different approach seems to be expressed when declaring: “ellipsis and repetition are such as to suggest not the carefully executed project of one or of many men, but rather the product of an organic development from originally independent traditions during a long period of transmission”.¹³ Furthermore:

Le fait que le Coran répète souvent ses thèmes principaux et cela volontiers avec le mêmes mots, nous le rend souvent très ennuyeux. Mais, Muḥammad, lui avait de bonnes raisons d’agir ainsi: ce que lui importait précisément dans ces répétitions, c’était d’inculquer profondément sa doctrine.¹⁴

In the Qur’ān God exemplifies and depicts the framework of the topic to present to the addressees of the Scripture through the narratives of the prophets, and especially through the words they spoke,¹⁵ by emphasizing the idea of the unity of prophecy and people’s reluctance to recognize.¹⁶ However, since not all

⁹ Neuwirth 2002: 261.

¹⁰ Gwynne 2004: 32

¹¹ Akhtar 2008: 148. An interesting example of repetition in the context of Qur’ānic narratives is found in a sort of formula, when Muḥammad and with him the reader/listener are asked: “Hast thou received (*wa hal atāka ḥadīth*) the story of the honoured guests of Abraham?” (Q. 51:24); (cf. Q. 20:9; 38:21; 79:15; 85:17–8; 88:1). Among the prophets’ utterances themselves, there are numerous diverse phrases/sentences which are repeated, identically or similarly, in the same sūra or in different sūras (cf. e.g. Noah in Q. 7:59; 23:23; Hūd in Q. 7:65; 11:50; Šāliḥ in Q. 7:73; 11:61; Shu’ayb in Q. 7:85; 11:84).

¹² Akhtar 2008: 148.

¹³ Wansbrough 2004: 47.

¹⁴ Bousquet 1953: 8–9.

¹⁵ Q. 37, in succession, presents several prophets: Noah, Abraham, Moses and Aaron, Elijah, Lot and Jonah. They are all basically sent as “warners” to their peoples, but the latter regularly react to them negatively by rejecting them and their divine message.

¹⁶ Cf. Mir 2001: 533.

the prophets are mentioned as speakers, the quantity of speech uttered by each prophet is undoubtedly proportionate to the development of each single story. For example, Job, Jonah and Elijah, as well as Adam, to whom little narrative development is given, are consequently not very well-developed as figures. In fact, they always remain minor characters, both in terms of narrative and direct speech, by emerging mainly in formulaic lists or idiomatic expressions.¹⁷

In order to explore these issues, this essay will give a general overview of some key features of the Islamic concepts of language of revelation and prophethood. This will be followed by an examination and a systematic arrangement of the story of Joseph as reported in the Qur'ān, in order to reproduce the plot of his prophetic account, comprehend and appreciate the overall message of the narrative and its textuality through his words, when found in a verbal exchange with other characters or in a monologue.

The purpose is thus to introduce a symmetrical reading, between incidents and the specific language used in the different parts of the Qur'ānic story of Joseph, in order to outline a personal profile and counter an approach that claims to see all the Qur'ānic envoys only in their instrumental function in the mission of Muḥammad. In fact, in different Qur'ānic passages, Muḥammad is told that the previous prophets were just like him. They had the same mission and, above all, had to endure the same trials, even though God always encourages him: "If they cry lies to thee, so too before them the people of Noah cried lies, and Ad and Thamood, and the people of Abraham, the people of Lot, and the men of Midian; to Moses also they cried lies" (Q. 22:42–4). This feature is also confirmed by the stereotypical historical-prophetic framework of most of the stories: God sends the envoy to his people, in order that they adhere to the monotheism he preaches; yet he is rejected, the signs he brought and his warning of a punishment are useless, then he invokes God and the unbelievers are punished and destroyed. As a result, this could mean that the other prophets would only be seen as a sort of *preparatio prophetica* of Muḥammad.

This approach would tend to neglect the different personalities and specific traits of the prophets, even though diverse profiles emerge through the situations they face and the language they use.¹⁸ Indeed, specifically for the prophets, through the dialogues the Qur'ān portrays the different characters in the different contexts and highlights their human traits, despite their divine mission.¹⁹ Such an aspect appears when reporting direct speech which defines remarkable peculiarities and

¹⁷ The case of prophets like Ishmael, Aaron and David is quite different: even though characterized only by a few utterances, they clearly appear linked to stronger characters in terms of individual narrative development, namely, Abraham, Moses and, although at a lower level, Solomon.

¹⁸ Cf. Mir 1992: 9–11; Mir 2001: 531–32.

¹⁹ Cf. e.g. Q. 7:35; 12:109; 14:11; 16:43; 25:20. On the human nature of the envoys, see also Q. 23:33–4; 25:7.

differences of human personality.²⁰ Certainly, “Dialogue is one of the media through which the Qur’an emphasizes their humanity”²¹ and it lets readers get a remarkable insight into characters²² seen as both envoys and human beings. Furthermore, it is also constantly confirmed when the words they speak are reported and in particular when they are clearly put in their mouth by God, as mere mouthpieces of divine revelation.²³ Indeed, these words passed untouched through them before being referred to their own people, since it is the “implied speaker”²⁴ Himself (i.e. God) who, having an omniscient perspective, often cites words spoken by the different prophets, the “embedded speakers”, whose speech is easily distinguishable. This clearly happens, for example, when the singular imperative *qul* recurs in the so-called “say-passages”,²⁵ that is to say, when God openly puts words in the mouth of his messengers.²⁶

For this essay the literature referring to exegetical works (*tafsīr*), both classical and modern, Tradition (*sunna*), as well as the collections of the Stories of the prophets (*qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*) has not been preliminarily investigated, even though there are several works quoted, concerning the issue of the prophets’ stories, but not because they have been considered unnecessary. Emphasis has been placed on the philological aspects of the story and speeches of Joseph, by concentrating the analysis on the Arabic version of the Qur’ān.

1. The language of sacred revelation

In Islam the idea of revelation is principally “linguistic in nature; it is, before being anything else, a concept working within the semantic field of language and speech. It is, to be sure, a very peculiar kind of linguistic concept”.²⁷ Consequently, the Qur’ān, “representing the highest form of rhetorical achievement in Arabic”,²⁸ is most evidently conscious of this. In fact, God

²⁰ According to Haleem (1999: 206) “the use of the direct speech of the unbelievers in the Qur’an is important as it records exactly what they utter so that they may be judged by what they themselves have professed rather than by what anybody has reported”. Cf. e.g. Q. 22:51–69; 26:16–31.

²¹ Mir 1992: 5.

²² Cf. Quṭb 1963: 163–70.

²³ Cf. Radscheit 2004: 310–11.

²⁴ Cf. Robinson 2003²: 234–8.

²⁵ Cf. Welch 1986: 421–23.

²⁶ The divine function of sending envoys and putting words into their mouth seems to be confirmed when in Q. 5:117 Jesus says to God: “I only said to them [men] what Thou didst command me”, even though one has to consider the controversial approach of the passage which clearly contrasts with the Christian notions of the Incarnation and the Trinity. See also e.g. Q. 20:47–8; 23:28–9; 26:16–7.

²⁷ Izutsu 1962: 123.

²⁸ Wansbrough 2004: 86.

revealed Himself by speaking,²⁹ therefore, revelation (*wahy*) is God's eternal word (*kalām Allāh*), the divine word revealed to Muḥammad that he received through an intermediary angel, eventually identified as Gabriel (*Jibrīl* or *Jibrā'īl*),³⁰ and then faithfully transmitted to his people as a prophet (*nabī*).³¹

As for the Islamic revelation, God chose a common sign-system, an understandable human language, namely, the Arabic language.³² From a targeted reading of several verses, as a self-referential text,³³ the Qur'ān clearly expresses self-awareness of its language as its main medium: "Truly it is the revelation of the Lord of all Being, brought down by the Faithful Spirit upon thy heart, that thou mayest be one of the warners, in a clear, Arabic tongue [*lisān 'arabī mubīn*]" (Q 26:192–95).³⁴ According to Mir, the adjective *mubīn* signifies "standard". The term *mubīn* appears both in Meccan and Medinan sūras, thus, it means that the Qur'ānic claim to be *mubīn* was made in both contexts. "This fact in itself supports the view that a standard version of Arabic was well-established, at least in the Ḥijāz and possibly in all of Arabia, at the time of Muḥammad and that Qur'ānic language represented that version".³⁵ Hence, it is evident that the linguistic condition of the Qur'ān itself remains not univocally clear.³⁶ In the Islamic concept of prophethood the language of revelation remains a crucial issue. In fact, the strong linguistic identity of Arabs, along with the belief in the

²⁹ The Qur'ānic idea that God speaks to humankind is fundamental, nevertheless Q. 42:51 specifies that with reference to revelation, speaking can be understood in different ways: inspiration, from behind a veil, through a messenger.

³⁰ Revelation, as an experience extending beyond prophecy and Scripture, did not come directly from God to the prophets since "It belongs not to any mortal that God should speak to him, except by revelation, or from behind a veil, or that He should send a messenger" (Q. 42:51). Yet, Q. 4:164 states that "unto Moses God spoke directly (*wa-kallama Allāhu Mūsā taklīman*)", though some commentators, reading the accusative *Allāha*, say that it was Moses who spoke to God directly; see van Ess 1996: 187–8. Cf. Q. 26:192–5. In Q. 53:1–18 it seems that the revelation was sent directly, without a medium.

³¹ The Qur'ān uses different terms for chosen and divinely inspired men. The most prevalent is *rasūl* (pl. *rusul*) which indicates a "messenger" or "one who is sent". The Qur'ānic *rasūl* is often synonymous with the name of Muḥammad (cf. e.g. Q. 2:143; 3:32; 4:59; 5:41; 9: 13; 48:29; 49:7; 64:12). The Qur'ān also employs the term *nabī* (pl. *nabiyyūn* and *anbiyā'*), an Arabic word of either Hebrew or Aramaic origin to refer to envoys with the equivalent meaning of the Hebrew Biblical term "prophet" (cf. e.g. I Cor 12:28–31; Eph 3:5; 4:11) or "one who brings news". See 'Abd al-Bāqī 1996: 781–82; Bobzin 2011: 567–74; Jeffery 1938: 276. Since prophecy, from the same root of *nabī*, *n-b -'* (cf. Q. 3:79; 6:89; 29:27; 45:16; 57:26), is mentioned together with the Book, the revelation of a sacred Scripture clearly appears as a distinctive sign of a prophet (cf. e.g. Q. 29:27; 57:26); Jeffery 1938: 277. Even though the specific use of the most recurrent Arabic terms for chosen and divinely inspired persons has been stated, namely, *rasūl* and *nabī*, throughout the whole essay both terms, along with "envoy", are used synonymously.

³² Cf. Izutsu 2002: 164; see Versteeg 2014: 9, 117.

³³ See Wild 2001: 33; cf. also Wild 2006a; Hoffman 2007: 157162.

³⁴ Cf. also Q. 12:1–2; 16:103.

³⁵ Mir 2006: 93.

³⁶ Retsö 2010: 281.

power of language, demonstrated that the language of the revelation was a key focus for both the Prophet and his adversaries in the acceptance/rejection of the Qur'ānic message, from the very beginning of Muḥammad's mission.³⁷ On the essential issue of connection between language and revelation, Izutsu points out:

Revelation as a linguistic concept has two different, but equally important, aspects: one of them concerns its being a "speech" (*kalām*) concept, in the narrow technical sense of the term "speech" as distinguished from "language" (*lisān*), and the other has to do with the fact that of all the cultural languages that were available at that time the Arabic language was chosen by God by design and not by accident as the means of divine speech. Using the Saussurian terminology we may distinguish these two aspects by saying that the former is the *parole*-side, while the latter is the *langue*-side of the problem, *kalām* in Arabic and *lisān* being roughly equivalent to the French *parole* and *langue* respectively.³⁸

Even though God chose Arabic for the Islamic revelation, the diversity of human languages is understood as a blessing and a sign of God's power in the larger context of divine creation: "And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and earth and the variety of your tongues and hues" (Q. 30:22). Therefore, God, the Qur'ān reports, sent messengers to their own people throughout history with a divine message in their language: "We have sent no Messenger save with the tongue of his people (*bi-lisāni qawmihi*), that he might make all (i.e. the message) clear to them" (Q. 14:4), but it does not say which languages the other messages were rendered in.³⁹ On the other hand, it seems that there is no other indication in the Qur'ān that the earlier people were considered as having their own idiom. Retsö, in fact, says that "the expression *lisān qawmihi* in XIV:4 most likely refers to the *lisān 'arabī*: all prophets have used this language". He also supports the idea of the absence of other languages in relation to previous revelations, because "the earlier prophets are implicitly seen as preaching in

³⁷ As for the Qur'ānic language, the Tradition has also developed a theological conception of the perfection of the Qur'ānic linguistic style, in relation to the dogma of inimitability (*i'jāz*). Thus, rhetorical studies on the Qur'ān have often had the purpose of highlighting its perfection as al-Jurjānī (d. 471/1078) in his *Dalā'il I'jāz al-Qur'ān* did, when establishing the theory of the stylistic miracle of the Qur'ān, on the basis of two notions: linguistic purity (*faṣāḥa*) and eloquence (*balāgha*).

³⁸ Izutsu 1962: 123–24.

³⁹ On this question, al-Qurṭubī (d. 621/1273) states that the languages of the prophets were Hebrew, Syriac and Arabic. All the sons of Israel spoke Hebrew and among them the first whom God permitted to speak it was Isaac. Syriac was the language of five prophets: Idrīs, Noah, Abraham, Lot and Jonah. While Adam, Hūd, Šāliḥ, Ishmael, Shu'ayb and Muḥammad spoke Arabic. Adam was the first to speak it, but later this language was deformed and changed into Syriac. See al-Qurṭubī 1991: 27–8; cf. Loucel 1963: 188–208.

the ‘*arabiyya* just like Muḥammad’⁴⁰ who received the revelation in his own language: “We have made it easy by thy (i.e. Muḥammad) tongue, that haply they may remember” (Q 44:58).⁴¹ Furthermore, the centrality of Arabic, as the language of both the Islamic revelation and previous revelations, is confirmed by one of the early Qur’ān scholars, Ibn ‘Abbās (ca. d. 68/687):

God has only revealed books in Arabic and Gabriel then translated them for each prophet into the language of his people [...]. There is no language of a people more comprehensive than the language of the Arabs. The Qur’ān does not contain any language other than Arabic although that language may coincide with other languages; however, as for the origin and category of the languages used, it is Arabic and nothing is mixed in with it.⁴²

The hermeneutical benefit of this perspective is clear: if the Word had been foreign, then it would have been open to greater interpretational variation than if it were only to be taken as Arabic.⁴³ On this matter, a different point of view is expressed by Stefan Wild:

The *raison d’être* of the Qur’ān is that the Prophet Muḥammad’s message was in Arabic whereas the other prophets had been sent earlier with a message in the language of their peoples, which were not Arabic. Muḥammad is sent to the Arabs and the Arabic language vouchsafes the understanding of the Arabic-speaking audience. For the Qur’ān, the fact that this revelation was in Arabic was the major difference between the Muslim revelation and all previous revelation. Before Muḥammad the Meccans and their forefathers had not received a *kitāb*, nor had a warner, i.e., a prophet, been sent to them.⁴⁴

Although the Qur’ān declares that Muḥammad’s Meccan community had not received the word of God earlier, “We have not given them any Books to study, nor have We sent them before thee any warner” (Q. 34:44), the pre-Islamic Arab communities were familiar with the concepts of “god” and “scripture”, besides being aware of the weight of language in communicating these concepts.⁴⁵ For this reason, the Arabic language clearly stands as the centre of the Islamic

⁴⁰ Retsö 2003: chap. 2, n. 150.

⁴¹ See also Q. 19:97.

⁴² Arabic text in Wansbrough 2004: 218; cf. Rippin 2002: 227.

⁴³ In this regard, it is worth remembering that in the Qur’ān there ‘are verses clear (*muḥkamāt*) that are the Essence of the Book, and others ambiguous (*mutashābihāt*) (Q. 3:7)’. The clear ones contain the divine universal orders and never change, whereas the ambiguous one contain the divine orders that are limited and do change; cf. Kinberg 1988: 143–72; Kinberg 2001: 70–7.

⁴⁴ Cf. Wild 2006b: 138.

⁴⁵ Cf. A. Saeed 1999: 95.

revelation, the cornerstone of the Qur'ān's authority, and proof of the divine origin of Muḥammad's recitation, whose author is "the God" (*Allāh*), one of the Arabian ancient gods of the so-called Age of Ignorance (*jāhiliyya*).

2. Qur'ānic narratives of the prophets

The Qur'ānic language, with regard to the semantic field of narratives, has three terms which seem to be used to designate the prophets' stories:⁴⁶ *qiṣṣa* (pl. *qaṣaṣ*), *naba'* (pl. *anba'*) and *ḥadīth* (pl. *aḥādīth*),⁴⁷ with the meaning of "story, account". In fact, several pericopes are started, accompanied or ended with one of these terms. A clear example can be found in the story of Joseph: "We will relate to thee the fairest of stories" (*al-qiṣaṣ*) (Q. 12:3).⁴⁸ In particular, *qiṣṣa* appears only in the plural, *qiṣaṣ*,⁴⁹ which lends itself to the title of Q. 28, *Sūrat al-Qaṣaṣ*, "The Story", while *naba'* is both singular and plural,⁵⁰ as well as *ḥadīth*.⁵¹

As for prophetic narratives, the Qur'ān shows a certain definite connection to the Bible text, since the features of the Biblical tradition it included are remarkable and also lead to Jewish post-Biblical midrash and apocryphal writings,

⁴⁶ See Tottoli 20002: 11–6.

⁴⁷ For *qiṣaṣ* and *naba'* as synonyms see e.g. Q. 11:120; 18:13, while *ḥadīth* is mentioned in Q. 20:9; 51:24; 79:15; 85:17. In this regard, Wansbrough (2004: 21) says that all three words stand for *exempla* rather than *historia*. In addition to these three terms, the most important Arabic words used in the semantic field of "narratives" are: *uṣṭūra*, "history without foundation, legend" (only in the plural, *asāfīr*; cf. e.g. Q. 6:25; 8:31; 16:24; 23:83; 83:13. From the same root, the verb *saṭara*, "to write", is also used; cf. e.g. Q. 17:58; 33:6), *sīra*, "way of acting" (also used for "battles, story, biography"), *ḥikāya*, *samar*, "entertainment", *khurāfa*, "incredible tale, legend", *riwāya*, "transmission, version", *nādīra*, "short and amusing anecdote", *khabar*, "information, statement, piece of history" (pl. *akhbār*, cf. e.g. Q. 9:94; 27:7), *mathal*, "parable", and *maqāma*, "assembly" (fr. "séance"); see Abdel-Meguid 1954: 195–204.

⁴⁸ See also Q. 3:62; 4:164; 6:130; 7:7, 35, 176; 12:102, 111; 40:78. Other prophets' narrative units are also called *naba'*; cf. e.g. the *naba'* of the two sons of Adam (Q. 5:27), Noah (Q. 10:71) and Abraham (Q. 26:69). See also Q. 3, 44; 6, 34; 7, 175; 9, 70; 11, 49; 14, 9; 28, 3; 38, 21; 54, 4. As for the phrase *anbā' al-ghayb*, "tidings/stories of the unseen", it refers to episodes that Muḥammad did not witness personally, because they happened long ago, such as the story of Mary (Q. 3:44), Noah (Q. 11:49) Joseph (Q. 12:102); cf. Bar-Asher 2002: 423–26. The *naba' / anbā'* is aimed both to fortify Muḥammad during his mission, (cf. Q. 11:120), and to instruct listeners about the destruction of ancient peoples because of their disobedience (cf. e.g. Q. 7:101; 9: 70).

⁴⁹ It is used four times; cf. Q. 3:62; 7:176; 12:3; 28:25. Furthermore, the verb *qaṣṣa*, "to tell a story, to relate" appears, among other passages, in Q. 4:164; 6:57; 7:7; 11:100; 11:120; 16:118; 18:13 (with *naba'*); 20:99 (with *anbā'*); 27:76; 40:78.

⁵⁰ Cf. e.g. Q. 5:27; 6:34; 7:175; 9:70; 10:71; 14:9; 26:69; 27:22; 28:3; 38:21; 64:5; 68:2.

⁵¹ Cf. e.g. Q. 31:6; 12:6; 23:44. Of the 6,000-plus verses that make up the Qur'ān, just over 1,500 are dedicated to the past, to the stories of the patriarchs and prophets, while 1,700 mention eschatological issues; see Platti 2002: 174.

as well as those belonging to the scriptures of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.⁵² If the Qurʾān demonstrates an awareness of the earlier revealed Books,⁵³ it is also noteworthy to highlight that the earliest Qurʾānic exegetes (*mufasssīrūn*) were also aware of the significance of Jewish post-Biblical midrash and apocryphal writings and their related lore.⁵⁴ As a result, their philologically oriented efforts at recognition and classification developed into a traditional issue in classical exegetical literature (*tafsīr*),⁵⁵ demonstrating, for instance, an evident dependence upon traditions from Jewish sources (*Isrāʾīliyyāt*),⁵⁶ as well as Christian sources.

The Qurʾān does not narrate the stories of all the prophets God sent down, so the number of envoys mentioned can be seen as partial. Some of them were left out intentionally.⁵⁷ Indeed, some exegetes wrote that several envoys were not sufficiently differentiated to be quoted, or were too numerous to all be named: according to some, they numbered 124,000.⁵⁸ In the Qurʾān there are twenty-five envoys mentioned by name, although there are some divergences about some of their individual identities. Furthermore, it refers to some other envoys only allusively or without identifying them by name,⁵⁹ but later Muslim exegetes recognized these envoys by name.⁶⁰

The Qurʾānic allusions to the earlier prophets are fundamentally aimed at legitimizing the veracity of Muḥammad's prophecy and support him against the

⁵² Different Qurʾānic themes, for example, Abraham's smashing of the idols (cf. e.g. Q. 6:74–84; 19:41–50; 21:51–73; 43:26–7; 60:4), seem to parallel some extra-canonical traditions, bearing out at the same time that there is no single collection that scholars could recognize as the chief source on which the Qurʾān clearly depends. All these episodes are not recognized as Biblical incidents, but midrashic.

⁵³ The Qurʾān proves the similarities between its accounts and those of the previous revelations (cf. Q. 16:43; 21:7). It also identifies people who received revealed Scriptures, *ahl al-dhikr*, (cf. Q. 16:43), in parallel with *ahl al-kitāb*, "People of the Book" or "those who have been given the book".

⁵⁴ Cf. e.g. Sidersky 1933; Katsh 1954; Bell 1968; Schwarzbaum 1982; Newby 1986: 19–32; Garsiel 2006; Elkayam 2009; Heller 1934: 281–86; Obermann 1941: 23–48; Reynolds 2011.

⁵⁵ For an overview of traditional and/or modern approaches to exegesis, see e.g. Gatje 1976; Ayoub 1984; Hawting, Shareef, 1993; Rippin 1988; Rippin 1999; Berg 2000; Saleh 2004; Lane 2006; Abdul-Raof 2010; Abdul-Raof 2012.

⁵⁶ Newby 1979: 685–97; Tottoli 1999: 193–210; 'Abd al-Raḥmān Rabī' 2001.

⁵⁷ See Q. 4:164; 40:78.

⁵⁸ Cf. e.g. al-Bayḍāwī 1988: 346.

⁵⁹ See Wheeler 2002: 9; Tottoli 2002: 44–5.

⁶⁰ The exegetical literature claims a Qurʾānic allusion to Ezekiel (*Hizqīl*) in Q. 2:243. Moreover, a few exegetical traditions identify Ezekiel with Dhū al-Kifl and with Elisha; see e.g. Vajda 1991: 242; Busse 2001: 527–29. The Biblical Samuel (*Shamwīl*, *Shamwāʾīl*, *Ashmawīl*, *Ashmāwīl* or *Ishmawīl*) has been seen in the anonymous prophet referred to in Q. 2:246–48; cf. al-kisāʾī 1997: 270–78; Brinner 2002: 439–44. Finally, Jeremiah (*Irmīyā*), according to traditional exegesis, has been identified with the prophet quoted in Q. 2:259–61; see al-Ṭabarī 1987, V: 438–84. Cf. Wheeler 2002: 161–63, 250–58, 289–90; Tottoli 2002: 102–12. In addition to these prophets, three other anonymous messengers must be named (cf. Q. 36:13–30). They are usually identified with three Christian apostles who were sent by Jesus to Antioch; see Walker 1931: 34.

majority of his Meccan adversaries. At the same time, they reflect the significant lack of success of Muḥammad in Mecca.⁶¹ In fact, “In speaking of the Biblical prophets, Muḥammad more than once fashioned his narrative on the contemporary situation in Mekka and Yathrib”.⁶² Through prophets’ deeds and the events connected with them, the Qur’ān reminds its audience of deeds and events associated with the circumstances in Muḥammad’s life.⁶³ Indeed, throughout his mission the Prophet dealt with various types of opposition, suspicion and criticism, not only theologically but also politically. First during the pre-*hijra* period in Mecca,⁶⁴ by the majority of the Arab pagans, and later, after the flight from Mecca (622 AD), by the Jewish questioners and opponents during his first years in Medina.⁶⁵ Different Meccan passages report that he suffered from being treated like a poet (*shā’ir*), liar (*kadhhdhāb*), madman (*majnūn*), soothsayer (*kāhin*) and sorcerer (*ṣāhir*), since his recitations were called legends that normal people could reproduce.⁶⁶ But the Qur’ān removes all these recriminations against Muḥammad stating that resisting the Prophet stands for resisting God.⁶⁷ Moreover, the Qur’ānic text also manifestly expresses God’s support to Muḥammad, by declaring that when a prophet delivers divine messages, God stays with him through celestial beings.⁶⁸ Muḥammad’s afflictions were similar to those of previous envoys.⁶⁹ Therefore, God encouraged him to achieve his mission with faith and patience: “Bear patiently what they say, and remember Our servant David, the man of might; he was a penitent” (Q. 38:17).⁷⁰ The Qur’ān also emphasizes that the stories of previous envoys help Muḥammad cope with the rejections and vexations of his unbelieving community: “And all that We relate to thee (i.e. Muḥammad) of the tidings of the Messengers is that whereby We

⁶¹ Cf. Marshall 1999: 29–30, 36–7; Montgomery Watt 1953, in particular Chap. 5. Horovitz (1926: 8–9) stresses the educational purpose of the narrative parts, by highlighting that not all of them are fashioned on Muḥammad’s incidents. This way of dealing with the previous prophets has led scholars to use the term “monoprophetism” of the Qur’ān and its religion, since all the prophets are conceived as Muḥammad conceived himself as a prophet; see De Prémare 1996: 150–62.

⁶² Rezvan 1997: 41.

⁶³ For the stories of punishment of unbelieving communities in the generations before Muḥammad, the analogies with his trials seems incontrovertible; see Saleh 2010: 36–7; Peters 2011: 116.

⁶⁴ See Montgomery Watt 1953: 22, 72; Paret 1961: 36.

⁶⁵ Montgomery Watt 1953: 72. The confrontation with the Jews emerges in particular in the Medina verses, as a central subject in the Qur’ān, where the polemical confrontation changed, by focusing on the demonstration that Muḥammad was the heir of the Biblical tradition. Moreover, Montgomery Watt (1981: 219) speculates on “what would have happened had the Jews come to terms with Muhammad instead of opposing him, they had become partners in the Arab Empire and Islam a sect of Jewry”. Cf. Rahman 1985: 60–97.

⁶⁶ Cf. e.g. Q. 37:36; 51:39,52; 52:29–30; 69:41–2. See Boullata 1988: 140; Bobzin 2011: 569–71.

⁶⁷ Cf. Q. 4:80, 152; 58:5; 59:7.

⁶⁸ See also Q. 2:286; 3:150; 6:51; 13:11; 72:27–8.

⁶⁹ See Q. 3:184; 6:10; 41:43.

⁷⁰ See also Q. 10:108; 13:43; 16:127–28; 20:130.

strengthen thy heart; in these there has come to thee the truth and an admonition, and a reminder to the believers” (Q. 11:120).⁷¹

Apart from several peculiarities and distinctive features of the stories and distinctive qualities of the different envoys, compared with Muḥammad’s mission and warning, the historical-prophetic framework seems to appear considerably simplified in an essential narrative pattern repeated from messenger to messenger: the prophet is sent by God to his people to urge them to adhere to the monotheism he preaches. Notwithstanding the warning of a punishment and the signs brought by the prophet during the mission, he meets opposition and rejection through accusations as a liar. In the end, God is invoked and the disbelieving people are punished and destroyed in a variety of explicit or unspecific ways, without clemency.⁷²

Therefore, the narratives appear as the account of the accusations and persecutions that each of the messengers was subject to with his people. At the same time, they are also a reminder of God’s intervention and guidance in history, on behalf of his envoys, since in the end they were all saved from evil.⁷³ However, it is inevitable that the understanding of each reference can best be obtained by identifying the contexts and the occasions in which the relative Qur’ānic passages were revealed (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), but also to whom they apply. In fact, the prophetic stories are frequently quoted and represent a meaningful segment of the Qur’ān,⁷⁴ along with other relevant stories,⁷⁵

⁷¹ Cf. Montgomery Watt 1953: 22, 72.

⁷² While in Medinan passages there are only a few short references to past divine punishments (cf. Q. 3:10–1; 9:70; 22:42–9; 47:10; 64:5–6), punishment stories mainly occur in the middle and late Meccan periods, the first phase of the prophetic mission (cf. Q. 6:6; 7:64–5, 78, 83–4, 91–2, 94, 165; 20:128; 25:39; 29:40; 36:31; 38:12–5; 43:55–6; 50:12–4). Particular attention on this issue has to be given to sūras 7, 11, 26, 27, 37, 54. They form a very considerable section of the Qur’ānic text. According to Horowitz (1926: 10–32) the progress of these punishment stories represents Muḥammad’s growing knowledge of the Biblical stories. Besides the peoples of the messengers, the Qur’ān also mentions other punished peoples, such as al-Rass (Q. 25:38–9; 50:12), Ṭubba’ (Q. 44:37; 50:14) and the people of Sheba (Q. 34:15–21), or punishment stories that refer to unnamed messengers (e.g. Q. 23:31–41). Abraham’s account, despite not being a punishment story as it does not have any reference to annihilation, sometimes appears in the stories of the punishment of Lot’s people (cf. e.g. Q. 11:69–83). Finally, Jonah represents the only messenger whose people escaped castigation, thanks to their repentance (cf. Q. 37:139–48; 10:98). See Marshall 1999: 71–3.

⁷³ See Q. 37:75–8, 107–9, 127–31; cf. Q. 12:110; 37:114–9.

⁷⁴ In general, the proportion of all the Qur’ānic narratives is very large: 1,453 verses, or about a quarter of their total number, approximately 6,000, while 1,700 have eschatological themes. See al-Suyūṭī 1967, I: 232; Sherif 1985: 46; Platti 2002: 174. They consist of stories about prophets (25 of them fall into this category; cf. al-Suyūṭī 1967, III: 67), sages, historical, mythical, historical-mythical or stereotyped figures of ancient times; see Tottoli 2006: 467–80; Gilliot 2003: 517.

⁷⁵ The relevant stories, in addition to the prophetic ones, include notable characters mentioned by name, Dhū al-Qarnayn (Q. 18:83–98) and Luqmān (Q. 31:12–9), whose narratives are often also included in those of the prophets, though they are not considered prophets in an official sense. Cf. Montgomery Watt 1997: 127; Heller, Stillman 1986: 811–13; Renard 2001: 61–2; Mathias Zahniser

mainly in the Meccan sūras. For this reason, they appear as a characteristic of this revelation period, rather than of the Medinan one. In Mecca the use of narrative, as a tool to relate Muḥammad's situation, could reflect failure and weakness. On the contrary, the Medinan period demonstrates only a small number of concise accounts or phrases,⁷⁶ frequently referring to punishment stories, thus, they "constitute the rather meagre narrative clothing of the believer-unbeliever relationship in Medina".⁷⁷ The difference between the narrative material of the two periods could be explained by starting from the changed religious conditions, as well as the growing power and authority of Muḥammad, as his attention turned to legal topics. As a result, messengers invoked as forerunners in the Meccan period of revelation were not as functional as in the Medinan period.⁷⁸

Several narrative parts appear integrated into sūras that are not characterized by stories, so they seem to appear as independent units.⁷⁹ On the other hand, there are also various passages composed entirely of stories or built around a nucleus of stories.⁸⁰ All these narrative sections, as a consequence, do not always present an easy understanding for full integration into a reconstruction of the stories themselves;⁸¹ thus, in general, priority is given to the moral aspects before the details, and all the characters, with their related incidents, are for the most part depicted as moral paradigms.⁸² In fact, among the main characteristics and theological effect of the prophetic narratives, their recurrence has always had a particular effect both on the reader and the listener. The peculiar dual oppositional form (e.g. good vs. evil; believers vs. unbelievers; messenger/prophet vs. Pharaoh; good cities vs. subverted/destroyed cities) invites the reader/listener to make an ethical or theological choice.⁸³

2003: 242–3; al-Ṭarfī 2003: 239–41; Wheeler 2002: 9, 72–3, 222–37; Noegel, Wheeler, 2002: 85, 196–7; Van Donzel, Schmidt 2009.

⁷⁶ See e.g. Q. 2:246–51; 5:20–6.

⁷⁷ Marshall 1999: 161.

⁷⁸ See Horovitz 1926: 25–7; Marshall 1999: 158–64.

⁷⁹ Cf. e.g. Q. 14:35–41 (Abraham), Q. 38:71–85 (Adam), Q. 40:23–56 (Moses), Q. 89:6–12 (ʿĀd, Thamūd and Pharaoh).

⁸⁰ Cf. e.g. Q. 7 which contains Noah (Q. 7:59–64), Hūd (Q. 7:65–72), Ṣāliḥ (Q. 7:73–9), Lot (Q. 7:80–4), Shuʿayb (Q. 7:85–93) and Moses (Q. 7:103–57); Q. 54 with five stories: Noah (Q. 54:9–17), Hūd (Q. 54:18–22), Ṣāliḥ (Q. 54:23–32), Lot (Q. 54:33–40) and Pharaoh (Q. 54:41–2). Q. 20 has two stories about Moses (Q. 20: 9–99) and Adam (Q. 20:115–28); while Q. 26:10–189 narrates seven stories: Moses (Q. 26:10–68), Abraham (Q. 26:69–104), Noah (Q. 26:105–22), Hūd (Q. 26:123–40), Ṣāliḥ (Q. 26:141–59), Lot (Q. 26:160–75) and Shuʿayb (Q. 26:176–89). See Gilliot 2003: 518–22.

⁸¹ Tottoli 2002: 17–8.

⁸² Cf. Donner 1998: 76–85. The lack of specific narrative features could suggest a certain knowledge to the first listeners of the Qur'ān in regard to Biblical traditions, through Jewish and Christian interpretations, in some circles where Muḥammad shared his revelations; see e.g. Reeves 2003; Reynolds 2011.

⁸³ See Gilliot 1999: 49–96. The importance of the Qur'ānic narratives of the prophets and the will to follow their actions, gave rise to a literary genre (*qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*) in Arabic Islamic literature,

3. Joseph's narrative in the Qur'ān

In the following paragraph the content of the Qur'ānic story about Joseph will be reconstructed from various, mostly brief passages distributed throughout the Qur'ān, in order to give an exhaustive account. This reconstruction will be made without respecting the chronological order of the revelations that is given only in the following table, according to the number of times in which Joseph's name is mentioned.⁸⁴

Number of times mentioned: 27			
Meccan period		Medinan period	
Sūras	Verses	Sūras	Verses
12	4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 17, 21, 29, 46, 51, 56, 58, 69, 76, 77, 80, 84, 85, 87, 89, 90 (2), 94, 99	/	/
6	84		
40	34		

The prophet Joseph (يوسف, Yūsuf), the son of Jacob, is mentioned in the Qur'ān by name only in three Meccan sūras.⁸⁵ In Q. 6:84 Joseph is listed together with other envoys (i.e. David, Solomon, Job, Moses, Aaron), as belonging to Abraham's seed. Furthermore, he is quoted in a long periscope with the narrative of Moses, where it says that Joseph came to Moses' people with "the clear signs (*bayyināt*)" (Q. 40:34), but they rejected him and the clear divine messages, by saying after his death: "God will never send forth a Messenger after him" (Q. 40:34).

Joseph is essentially portrayed as "truthful (*ṣiddīq*)" (Q. 12:46),⁸⁶ a term which indicates his moral superiority, and as an adult God "gave him judgment and knowledge (Q. 12:22)".⁸⁷ His story, "the fairest of stories (*aḥsan al-qaṣaṣ*)" (Q. 12:3) and the longest sustained Qur'ānic account of a character, is mainly

from the end of the first/sixth century; see e.g. Khoury 1978; Brinner 1986: 63-82; Tottoli 1998: 131-60; Tottoli 2002: 138-64; al-Ṭarāfī 2002; Klar 2006: 339-49.

⁸⁴ Qur'ānic verses are listed in chronological order in accordance with the now-standard Egyptian edition of the Qur'ān in 1924 under the aegis of al-Azhar.

⁸⁵ See Jeffery 1938: 295; Tottoli 2002: 28-31; Goldman 2003: 55-7. On Joseph in Islamic tradition see e.g. al-Ṭarāfī 2003: 180-231; Brinner 1986: 181-235; Wheeler 2002: 127-45. For the Jewish background to some aspects of the story, see Waldman 1986: 47-64; Abdel Haleem 1990: 171-91; Bernstein 2006.

⁸⁶ In Q. 12:27, 51 he is mentioned as "one of the truthful (*mīn al-ṣādiqīn*)".

⁸⁷ The same is said of Moses in Q. 28:14, Lot in Q. 21:74 and David and Solomon in Q. 21:79.

related in Q. 12, which also bears his name.⁸⁸ The Qur'ān explicitly states that in “Joseph and his brethren were signs for those who ask questions (*āyāt li-l-sā'ilīn*)” (Q. 12:7). It is also “surely a lesson (*'ibra*) to men possessed of minds; it is not a tale forged, but a confirmation of what is before it, and a distinguishing of everything, and a guidance, and a mercy (*huda wa raḥma*) to a people who believe” (Q. 12:111), but also a clear exhortation, in order to see the divine presence in daily life. In fact, in the same sūra God declares: “We visit with Our mercy whomsoever We will, and We leave not to waste the wage of the gooddoers. Yet is the wage of the world to come better for those who believe, and are godfearing” (Q. 12:56–7).

Sūrat *Yūsuf* recounts events from Joseph's conversations about his dreams with his father Jacob, to his exile and incarceration because of his unnamed brothers,⁸⁹ including the final happy ending with the resolution of all the family's disputes. The story, focusing on Joseph and his father's torment, functions as a didactic account in which righteous and immoral deeds are evidently portrayed through the behaviour of the different characters. On the contrary, Joseph and Jacob serve as models of virtue, faith, honesty and chastity in the face of adversity. For all these reasons the former could easily represent a model for the mission of Muḥammad.⁹⁰

The centre of the narrative remains the prophetic nature of Joseph's dreams.⁹¹ The first of four in the sūra is the one that Joseph told his father: “Father, I saw eleven stars, and the sun and the moon; I saw them bowing down before me” (Q. 12:4–5).⁹² Jacob considered that dream as an ascension to power that could cause envy and resentment, so he advised his son not to tell it to anyone: “O my son, relate not thy vision to thy brothers, lest they devise against thee some guile. Surely Satan is to man a manifest enemy” (Q.12:5–7).⁹³ Through divine guidance and inspiration, Q. 12 also highlights Jacob's

⁸⁸ For a study of selected aspects of the sūra see Mir 1986: 1–15; see also de Prémare 1987: 36–59; Johns 1988; Afsar 2006.

⁸⁹ Besides Joseph's brothers, the most important blood brothers in the Qur'ān are Cain and Abel and Moses and Aaron; cf. Q. 5:27–32; 7:142; 20:30; 23:45; 28:34.

⁹⁰ See de Prémare 1989: 167; cf. Stern 1985: 193–204.

⁹¹ See Kinberg 2001: 548–50.

⁹² Q. 12 reports four symbolic dreams that require interpretation. In addition to Q. 12:4–5 (cf. Gen 37:4–6), there are the dreams of the two companions who met Joseph in prison, (Q. 12:35–41; cf. Gen 40:5–19) and that of the Pharaoh (Q. 12:43). Dreams are also central during the mission of other prophets (the order given to Abraham to sacrifice his son (Q. 37:102, 105) and Muḥammad's return to Mecca (Q. 48:27) and are always premonitions that indicate a plan of God. It means that Prophets' dreams are equal to revelations; cf. Kinberg 2001: 546–53; Kunitzsch 2006: 106–9.

⁹³ In Gen 37:5–10 Joseph had two dreams and told his father and brothers both of them; see Abdel Haleem 1999: 138–57.

prophetic nature, starting from his knowledge of Joseph's future: "So will thy Lord choose thee, and teach thee the interpretation of tales (*ta'wīl al-aḥādīth*), and perfect His blessing upon thee and upon the House of Jacob" (Q. 12:6). This premonition is confirmed in the sūra when it says: "We might teach him the interpretation of tales (Q. 12:21)", a means through which men know God's decrees.

Without a doubt, Jacobs had been right in his prediction. His sons, very jealous of Joseph and his brother (i.e. Benjamin),⁹⁴ complained because of Jacob's preference for them:

"Surely Joseph and his brother are dearer to our father than we, though we are a band. Surely our father is in manifest error. Kill you Joseph, or cast him forth into some land, that your father's face may be free for you, and thereafter you may be a righteous people". One of them said, "No, kill not Joseph, but cast him into the bottom of the pit and some traveller will pick him out, if you do aught" (Q. 12:9–10).

When they asked their father to send Joseph with them to the pasture, he replied he feared the wolf would eat him, but they assured him they would take good care of Joseph and when they took him away, they rid themselves of him by throwing him to the bottom of the well. At the end of the day, they came back home weeping, because a wolf had really devoured Joseph. Pretending to be truthful, they showed their father Joseph's shirt (*qamīṣ*) with false blood⁹⁵ to prove his loss. Jacob patiently endured this test, but he said: "No; but your spirits tempted you to do somewhat. But come, sweet patience (*ṣabr jamīl*)! And God's succour is ever there to seek against that you describe" (Q. 12:18). Later, a man from a caravan, while was drawing water from the well with a pail, found Joseph and considered him as part of merchandise, so he screamed: "Good news (*yā bushrā*)!" (Q. 12:19).⁹⁶ Then, Joseph was sold

⁹⁴ In the Qur'ānic text Benjamin, identified in the Bible as the son of Jacob and Rachel, is never mentioned by name, even though he has a central function in the narrative of Joseph. Their relationship can be seen as a *leitmotiv* and every reference to Benjamin suggests a development of the story. Gen 37:3–4 narrates that Jacob loved Joseph more because he was the son he had during his old age.

⁹⁵ Cf. Q. 12:11–8. Gen 37:31–3 reports that Joseph's brothers took his coat and dipped it in the blood of a goat. Then, it was shown to their father saying that Joseph had been devoured by an evil beast. The shirt, as a symbolic piece of clothing, is attested several times in the Qur'ānic story of Joseph. In addition to its use with false blood as proof of his death (cf. Q. 12:18), it is also used by his employer's wife when she tried to seduce him (cf. Q. 12:25–8 and the incident between the Queen of Sheba and Solomon in Q. 27:44) and finally to restore Jacob's sight (cf. Q. 12:93). A shirt always acts to establish truth after adversity.

⁹⁶ This exclamation could be symbolically related to the messenger in Q. 12:96 who told Jacob that Joseph was still alive.

for “a paltry price” (Q. 12:20), a few *darāhim* (sing. *dirham*), as a slave to a man from Egypt, where God finally established him.⁹⁷ He was Al-‘azīz, “the powerful”,⁹⁸ an Egyptian official who treated him like a son.

After Joseph had reached maturity, the Qur'ān narrates that he was subject to the temptation of the unnamed wife of his adopted master, but Joseph reacted by saying: “God be my refuge. Surely my lord has given me a goodly lodging. Surely the evildoers do not prosper” (Q. 12:23). Although he was also attracted to her, through complete trust in God and divine support he controlled his concupiscence, and when “he saw the proof of his lord (*burhān rabbihī*)” (Q. 12:24), she was unable to seduce him. Thus, God saved him and “might turn away from him evil and abomination; he was one of Our devoted servants (*‘ibādīnā al-mukhlaṣīn*)” (Q. 12:24).⁹⁹ But, while he was struggling to get away from her by running to the door, she tore Joseph's shirt from behind (which would prove Joseph's innocence to his employer and a witness of the people).¹⁰⁰ Then, they met Al-‘azīz at the entrance and she accused Joseph of attempted rape.

Notwithstanding her false accusation, Al-‘azīz's wife had heard malicious talk from the women of the city. They started accusing her of improper behavior due to her strong passion for Joseph. Thus, she organized a banquet for them and gave each a knife (*sikkīn*).¹⁰¹ When she told Joseph to come before them and she admitted she had tried to seduce him, they started cutting their hands in their amazement at him:¹⁰² Joseph was there with his powerful symbolic value of beauty. Then, the unnamed master's wife said: “if he will not do what I command him, he shall be imprisoned, and be one of the humbled” (Q. 12:32) and Joseph, for fear of being subjected to their seduction, called on divine protection against the women: “My Lord, prison is dearer to me than that they call me to; yet if Thou turnest not from me their guile, then I shall yearn towards them, and so become one of the ignorant” (Q. 12:33). In conclusion, God answered his prayer and he was taken to prison.¹⁰³

He was imprisoned with two cell-mates who told Joseph their dreams and asked him to interpret them. One narrated that he had seen himself pressing grapes, the other that he had seen himself carrying bread on his head while

⁹⁷ See also Q. 12:21.

⁹⁸ He is the Biblical Potiphar; cf. Gen 37:36; 39:1. See Goldman 1995: 109–34.

⁹⁹ This incident confirms that chastity had a prominent Qur'ānic example in Joseph and his rejection of sexual advances is seen as keeping away from sinful acts in several other passages of the sūra; cf. Q. 12:51; 12:53.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Q. 12:25–9.

¹⁰¹ This term occurs only once in the entire Qur'ānic text.

¹⁰² Cf. Q. 12:30–2.

¹⁰³ Cf. Q. 12:34–5. In Q. 12:25 the prison is described using Qur'ānic terms reserved for hell, a “painful chastisement (*‘adhāb alīm*)”; cf. e.g. Q. 2:10, 90, 174.

birds were picking at it.¹⁰⁴ Joseph said: “Fellow-prisoners, as for one of you, he shall pour wine for his lord; as for the other, he shall be crucified, and birds will eat of his head. The matter is decided whereon you enquire” (Q. 12:41).

When in Q. 12:43 the Pharaoh told his advisors about his dream of the seven fat cows devouring the seven lean ones and the seven green and seven withered ears of corn, and asked for their interpretation, they replied they could not interpret the dream because it was “a hotchpotch of nightmares (*adghāf ahlām*)” (Q. 12:44).¹⁰⁵ Only Joseph was able to offer a true interpretation.¹⁰⁶ He said:

You shall sow seven years after your wont; what you have harvested leave in the ear, excepting a little whereof you eat. Then thereafter there shall come upon you seven hard years, that shall devour what you have laid up for them, all but a little you keep in store. Then thereafter there shall come a year wherein the people will be succoured and press in season (Q. 12:47–9).

Released from prison, Joseph asked the Egyptian ruler through a messenger about the women who had tried to seduce him and cut their hands. Al-‘azīz’s wife and the other women absolved him, asserting his virtue and truthfulness, although Joseph confessed: “Yet I claim not that my soul was innocent, surely the soul of man incites to evil, except inasmuch as my Lord had mercy; truly my Lord is All-forgiving, All-compassionate” (Q. 12:53), and, after the Pharaoh had spoken to Joseph, he told him: “Today thou art established firmly in our favour and in our trust” (Q. 12:54). Therefore, Joseph became viceroy,¹⁰⁷ after having been a slave.

The story goes on, with Jacob who sent his sons to Egypt to purchase corn. They came to Joseph and, unaware of his true identity, they did not recognize him.¹⁰⁸ He gave them corn and, exercising power over them, ordered them: “Bring me a certain brother of yours from your father (i.e. Benjamin)” (Q 12:59),¹⁰⁹ while commanding his servants to put his brothers’ merchandise

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Q. 12:36. The word “bread (*khubz*)” is attested only here in the whole Qur’ān. The influence of the Biblical story is evident in the identification of this prisoner as the king’s baker; cf. Gen 40:16–7.

¹⁰⁵ The same phrase recurs in Q. 21:5 with reference to Muḥammad accused by unbelievers of being a mere dreamer of confused dreams, while transmitting revelations.

¹⁰⁶ In the Bible the Pharaoh, like Joseph, also had two dreams (cf. Gen 41:1–7) that Joseph could interpret (cf. Gen 41:14–32), whereas the Qur’ān tells of only one dream for each character.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Q. 12:78, 88.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Gen 42:1–8.

¹⁰⁹ Gen 42:14–20 says that Joseph accused his brothers of being spies, so he asked them, as a test, to bring him their youngest brother. Thus, Joseph created a pretence to put them all in prison and, except for one of them, they were released only three days later, so that they could come back home and satisfy Joseph’s request.

into their saddle bags. On their return home, when they told their father of Joseph's request, Jacob replied: "shall I entrust him to you otherwise than as I entrusted before his brother to you?" (Q. 12:64). Putting them to the test, to discover whether they would be faithful to their promise, he said with reluctant words of consent:

"Never will I send him with you until you bring me a solemn pledge by God that you will surely bring him back to me unless it be that you are encompassed". When they had brought him their solemn pledge he said, "God shall be Guardian over what we say". He also said, "O my sons, enter not by one door; enter by separate doors. Yet I cannot avail you anything against God; judgment belongs not to any but God. In Him I have put my trust; and in Him let all put their trust who put their trust" (Q. 12:66–7).¹¹⁰

When Joseph's brothers had come back to him, he took his brother (i.e. Benjamin) into his arms and said: "I am thy brother; so do not despair of that they have done" (Q. 12:69). After having given them provisions, Joseph put the king's drinking-cup into Benjamin's saddlebag and when a herald found it, he was arrested. At this point in the narrative, the Qur'ān declares: "So We contrived for Joseph's sake; he could not have taken his brother, according to the king's doom, except that God willed" (Q. 12:76).¹¹¹ The brothers were accused of being thieves, but they denied they had stolen the king's drinking-cup.¹¹² When it was found in Benjamin's saddlebag, Joseph's brothers, changing heart and being faithful to their pledge, begged Joseph to incarcerate one of them instead of their brother, because it would be a great sorrow for their aged father. But, Joseph did not accept and the falsely accused son was taken. Then, he said: "God forbid that we should take any other but him in whose possession we found the goods; for if we did so, we would be evildoers" (Q. 12:79).

When they returned home and told Jacob that Benjamin had been detained in Egypt, because of his theft, he said:

but your spirits tempted you to do somewhat. But come, sweet patience (*ṣabr jamīl*)! Haply God will bring them all to me; He is the All-knowing, the All-wise. And he turned away from them, and said, "Ah, woe is me for Joseph!" And his eyes turned white because of the sorrow that he choked within him (Q. 12:83–84). Therefore, Jacob begged his sons: "Depart, my sons, and search out tidings of Joseph and his brother" (Q. 12:87).

¹¹⁰ Cf. Gen 42:29–38.

¹¹¹ Cf. Gen 44:1–34.

¹¹² Cf. Q. 12:70–3; Gen 44:4–8.

When Jacob's sons came to Joseph again to ask for more corn, although they had little money, they begged him to be of assistance for their family in distress. He then revealed his identity to them and they replied: "God has indeed preferred thee above us, and certainly we have been sinful (*khāṭi'in*).¹¹³ He said, 'No reproach this day shall be on you; God will forgive you; He is the most merciful of the merciful (*arḥam al-rāḥimīn*)'" (Q. 12:91–2). Afterwards, he gave them one of his shirts and asked them to lay it on Jacob's face, so that he could regain his sight, and to bring him all the family.¹¹³

After the caravan left Egypt, Jacob claimed he could perceive Joseph's scent, proving that he was still alive. Then, "the bearer of glad tidings (*al-bashīr*)" (Q. 12:96) threw, as Joseph had ordered, the shirt over his father's face and his sight was restored. In this way Joseph's prophecy and kingship were confirmed, as well as Jacob's love for Joseph, the key element in the narrative from beginning to end.

By focusing on a striking meeting between Joseph and his family, once they had reached him in Egypt, when Joseph saw his parents, he took them into his arms by saying: "Enter you into Egypt, if God will, in security" (Q. 12:99).¹¹⁴ He then raised his parents high on the throne and they all fell on their knees in prostration.¹¹⁵ The narrative ends with the following words of Joseph:

this is the interpretation of my vision of long ago; my Lord has made it true. He was good to me when He brought me forth from the prison, and again when He brought you out of the desert, after that Satan set at variance me and my brethren. My Lord is gentle to what He will; He is the All-knowing, the All-wise. O my Lord, Thou hast given me to rule, and Thou hast taught me the interpretation of tales. O Thou, the Originator of the heavens and earth, Thou art my Protector in this world and the next. O receive me to Thee in true submission, and join me with the righteous (Q. 12:100–1).

3.1. Joseph: words and profile

The relationship between the Qur'ānic text and Muḥammad is so intimate that the revelation appears as a direct discourse from God to his Prophet, in which "the divine-human dialogue represents a special favour that man receives from God".¹¹⁶ Therefore, the Qur'ānic text displays God as the speaker (the revealer), who conveys the divine message preserved in the celestial Text, and the Prophet, Muḥammad, in the function of the first addressee (the hearer), since, as reported

¹¹³ Cf. Q. 12:93–6; Gen 45:1–28.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Gen 46:1–34.

¹¹⁵ Cf. Q. 12:4, 100. Prostration, like bowing, a fundamental gesture alluding to devotion in general; cf. e.g. Q. 2:34; 7:11–2, 120; 15:29–33; 17:61; 18:50; 20:70, 116; 26:46; 27:24–5; 38:72–5.

¹¹⁶ Mir 1992: 4.

by most accounts, he was ordered with authority at the very beginning of the revelation: “recite: In the Name of thy Lord (*iqra' bi-smi rabbika*)” (Q. 96:1).¹¹⁷ Finally, the people (*al-nās*), through the announcement of Muḥammad, “the mouthpiece of the divine will”,¹¹⁸ appear in the function of second addressee, identified as a large or small group in relation to the circumstances of revelation. The major difference between the first and the second addressee is that the latter react at once with assent, rejection or insist on additional explanations.

The most common kinds of dialogues are those between a prophet and his nation, besides those which occur between God and some of his prophets, while being assigned a given task, when they ask a question and receive an answer, or receive insight into divine will and decrees. Among the other more recurrent addressees there is the town/tribal assembly, or council of nobles (*al-mala'*) that, in addition to the prophets' peoples, represents the chief impediment to the achievement of the aim of several prophets, namely the conversion of all their people.¹¹⁹ The figure of the Pharaoh as an interlocutor also appears in the narrative of Joseph.¹²⁰ Moreover, Joseph also converses with his master's wife and cell-mates,¹²¹ as well as with his brothers.¹²² Finally, several prophets are found in a sort of monologue/soliloquy, or one-sided dialogues,¹²³ when relating and sharing desires, feelings or thoughts. Jacob said: “Ah, woe is me for Joseph!” (Q. 12:84), then he became blind in one eye out of sorrow at the loss of his son Joseph.¹²⁴

In the field of Qur'ānic sciences, indeed, various classical works investigate the different models of address (*khiṭāb, mukhāṭabāt*),¹²⁵ but only rarely distinguish

¹¹⁷ God's creative imperative was also a command “Be (*kun*)!”; see Q. 2:117; 3:47; 19:35; 40:68; cf. Q 3:59; 6:73; 16:40; 36:82. Indeed, command may represent the principal form of God's mode of speech; see Izutsu 1956: 52–3; Gwynne 2004: 67.

¹¹⁸ Montgomery Watt 1970: 67.

¹¹⁹ This specific addressee emerges in the narrative of Noah (Q. 11:38) and mainly in that of Moses and the Pharaoh where the major clash between an envoy, as a representative of heavenly power, materializes against a representative of earthly evil (cf. e.g. Q. 7:104–6; 10:75; 17:102; 20:50–61, 63–70; 26:26–54), or, in other words, the major clash between the celestial court of God (*al-mala' al-'alā*) and an earthly court is materialized. See e.g. Heck 2005: 125–51.

¹²⁰ Cf. Q 12:52–5.

¹²¹ Cf. Q 12:23, 37–41, 42, 47–9.

¹²² Cf. Q 12:59–61, 69, 77–9, 88–93.

¹²³ This specific kind of dialogue also occurs in relation to God, for instance, when in Q 2:34–9. He addresses Satan and Adam and Eve; cf. Mir 1992: 9–11; Mir 2001: 531–32.

¹²⁴ Solomon, when he was presented with standing steeds, said: “Lo, I have loved the love of good things better than the remembrance of my Lord, until the sun was hidden behind the veil. Return them to me!” (Q. 38:32–3). Lot cried: “This is a fierce day” (Q. 11:77), after angels had come to him. Moses, after he had accidentally killed an Egyptian, said: “This is of Satan's doing; he is surely an enemy misleading, manifest” (Q. 28:15), then, while heading for Midian, he said: “It may be that my Lord will guide me on the right way” (Q. 28:22).

¹²⁵ Gwynne 2006: 73–86.

sections where the general audience is addressed from those in which one character addresses another (e.g. Jacob and his sons).¹²⁶ Actually, due for the most part to its original oral character, the Qur'ān shows great dynamism when addressing its audience directly, but also when reporting direct speech, such as in dialogues,¹²⁷ a significant and recurrent trait of the Qur'ānic style, and “a mosaic of voices”.¹²⁸ On the contrary, Watt-Bell seems to underestimate its potentiality as a literary feature of the Qur'ān since “direct speech is apt to be ‘interjected’ at any point, as the personages mentioned in the narrative express themselves in words”.¹²⁹

Dialogues, most of which are mainly “simple exchanges that are not dialogues in a strict sense”,¹³⁰ as well as the quite rare monologues, prevail in the second and third Meccan periods, due to the disapproval of the Quraysh. Indeed:

the Qur'ān – which presents a program of social action within a framework of struggle – reflects, through dialogue, the interaction between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities of Arabia on the one hand and among the members of the Muslim community itself on the other. Dialogue is inevitably interactive and social, and given the Qur'ān's overt and strong social dimension, its frequent use in the Qur'ān is understandable. At the same time, use of dialogue makes the Qur'ān stylistically akin to the Bible, where dialogue is very prominent.¹³¹

Furthermore, it could be said that in the Qur'ānic literary features, each character's speech appears as a kind of “narration-through-dialogue”,¹³² even though, when speaking about the relationship between narration and dialogue in the Qur'ān, Mir writes that narration also “lays down the parameters within which dialogue will take place, setting the terms and conditions of dialogue, and furnishing guidelines for correctly evaluating and interpreting a given dialogue”.¹³³

¹²⁶ Some modern Arabic works discuss the general style and form of Qur'ānic narratives. Among them 'Abbās 1982, in which all of the narratives are arranged in chronological order, and Ḥasan 1987, who explores many literary devices, such as *uslūb al-istifhām*, “interrogative style”, and *uslūb al-asnādī*, “predicative style”.

¹²⁷ See Izutsu 2002: 151–97; Tritton 1972: 5–22; Mir 1992: 1–22; Mir 2001: 531–5; Abdel Haleem 1999: 206; Heemskerk 2006: 108–12.

¹²⁸ Johns 1981: 32.

¹²⁹ Montgomery Watt 1970: 80.

¹³⁰ Mir 1992: 3. The same cannot be said of several of Moses' dialogues, such as Q. 18:65–83 (Moses and al-Khidr [or al-Khaḍir]) and Q. 26:16–37 (Moses and the Pharaoh); cf. e.g. McAuliffe 2001: 511–4.

¹³¹ Mir 2001: 534.

¹³² Alter 1981: 69; cf. Mir 1992: 17.

¹³³ Mir 1992: 18.

Direct speech is, in any case, definitely a usual narrative pattern in the Qur'ān and sometimes it appears very abruptly, mainly introduced by the verb *qāla*, “to say”, in addition to verbs, such as, *talā*, “to recite”, and *nabba'a*, “to inform”, mostly in the imperative form.¹³⁴

It is also interesting to observe that the use of *an* (*ḥarf tafsīr*, “particle of interpretation”), “that”, before quotations is a common literary feature considered by Fischer¹³⁵ as typical of “Vorarabisch”.¹³⁶ Other features which denote a foreword of Qur'ānic dialogues dealing with the prophets are several short phrases¹³⁷ like *wa-idh* + verb, for example: “And when (*wa-idh*) thy Lord said to the angels” (Q. 2:30);¹³⁸ “And when Abraham said” (Q. 2:126);¹³⁹ “And when Moses said to his people” (Q. 5:20);¹⁴⁰ “And when Jesus son of Mary said” (Q. 61:6).¹⁴¹ The same function is achieved by the phrase *fa-lammā* + verb + *qāla*, “So, when (*fa-lammā*) they entered unto Joseph, he took his father and mother into his arms saying” (Q. 12:99).¹⁴² Furthermore, in order to support the mission of Muḥammad, God usually addresses him through using various formulae, for instance: “Hast thou received the story (*hal atāka ḥadīthu*) of Moses?” (Q. 20:9).¹⁴³ Hence, the symbolic significance that the stories of the prophets has for Muḥammad and the addressees of his divine message.

Furthermore, with an obvious conative function of the discourse, different prophets address their interlocutors through the use of the vocative particle *yā*,

¹³⁴ Cf. the two sons of Adam (Q. 5:27); Noah (Q. 10:71); Abraham (Q. 26:69) and his guests (Q. 15:51); Joseph (Q. 12:36). Verbs other than *qāla*, *talā* or *nabba'a* may also open a citation. This is the case for the verb *dhakara*, “to mention/remember”, which corresponds to an explicit request and accentuates the function of God's speech addressed to Muḥammad, when the issue is the narratives of previous prophets as model figures; cf. Q. 19:16, 41, 51, 54, 56; 38:17, 41, 45, 48; 46:21. See Horowitz 1926: 5. The same aim is pursued with the imperative form of the verb *daraba*, “to strike”, as a divine order, in the sentence “And strike for them a similitude” (Q. 18:32; cf. also Q. 36:13), or in its cognate phrase “God has struck a similitude” (Q. 16:112; cf. also Q. 66:10). These are recurring phrases which generally indicate an abrupt change of theme and begin a narrative or a dialogue.

¹³⁵ Fischer 1987: 188, n. 1.

¹³⁶ It recurs in various speeches by prophets, such as Noah, “Serve you none but God (*an lā ta'budu illa Allāh*)” (Q. 11:26), “saying, Serve God (*an u'budū -llāh*)” (Q. 71:3), or Šāliḥ, “Serve you God! (*an u'budū -llāh*)” (Q. 27:45); cf. Talmon 2002: 365–6. Other examples of *ḥarf tafsīr* designating the beginning of prophets' utterances are found in Q. 2:125, 127, 132; 11:26; 20:64; 27:45; 38:33; 44:18–9; 46:21, 24. This literary feature often leads to the use of *iltifāt*; cf. Abdel Haleem 1999: 206.

¹³⁷ Cf. Mir 2001: 532.

¹³⁸ In Q. 5:116 God speaks to Jesus, while in Q. 15:28 to angels again.

¹³⁹ See also Q. 2:126, 260; 6:74; 14:35; 43:26.

¹⁴⁰ See also Q. 2:54, 67; 14:6; 18:60; 61:5.

¹⁴¹ Other examples can be found in Q. 21:76, 83, 85, 87, 89, 91; 26:10; 27:7; 29:28.

¹⁴² Cf. also Q. 2:249; 10:76

¹⁴³ See also Q. 79:15; cf. Q. 2:243, 246, 258; 14:9; 38:21; 51:24; 64:5; 85:17; 88:1.

“O”, in different phrases, or by directly invoking God. The following table shows the occurrences of Joseph when using a vocative phrase and interlocutors whom he addresses:

Vocative phrase	Transliteration	Translation	Verses
رَبِّ	<i>Rabbi</i>	‘(O my) Lord’	12:33, 101
اَبَتِّ	<i>yā abati</i>	‘(O my) father’	12:4, 100

All these passages corroborate that, recurrently, God, identified as the “implied speaker” of the Qur’ān with an omniscient perspective since He knows past and future episodes,¹⁴⁴ mentions words spoken by different Qur’ānic characters, for example:

We will relate to thee the fairest of stories in that We have revealed to thee this Koran, though before it thou wast one of the heedless. When Joseph said to his father, “Father, I saw eleven stars, and the sun and the moon; I saw them bowing down before me” (Q. 12:3–4).

In this example the words are evidently spoken by Joseph, as an “embedded speaker”.¹⁴⁵ As Izutsu put it, the Qur’ān, being “God’s speech”, is divine but is also speech, consequently, it obeys the rules of the models, as well as limitations, of all human speech.¹⁴⁶ In fact, even though the embedded speakers’ speech is generally differentiated from that of the implied speaker, there are various cases where this does not occur. Therefore, there is the possible risk of confusing the speech of the embedded speaker with that of the implied speaker.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ Robinson 2003²: 238–40. There are many other pericopes where God also discloses people’s hidden thoughts (cf. e.g. Q 2:76; 9:107), or informs them about future eschatological incidents (cf. e.g. Q 6:27; 7:44–53; 8:50; 32:12–4, 17; 34:31–3, 51; 52:11–27), with the aim of arousing fear in the addressees.

¹⁴⁵ Robinson 2003²: 238–40; cf. also Q. 3:52; 7:59; 20:9–10. There are also examples which concern pericopes where God cites what people will utter in the hereafter; cf. e.g. Q 66:8; 69:25–6.

¹⁴⁶ Izutsu 2002: 166.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Robinson 2003²: 321, n. 11. There is one passage, for example, where words, according to Robinson, are spoken by Jesus, but are not preceded by “he said”, (the same can be said for Q. 6:104, 114; 11:2–3; 27:91–2; 42:10; 51:50–1, corresponding to Muḥammad) “Surely God is my Lord, and your Lord; So serve you Him. This is a straight path” (Q. 19:36), but despite this, Robinson (2003²: 234–5) says “in this instance Jesus’ words cannot be confused with those of the implied speaker because God would not say ‘Allah is my Lord’”. Furthermore, Q. 19:36 is identical to Q. 43:64 (see also Q. 3:51), “Assuredly God is my Lord and your Lord; therefore serve Him; this is a straight path”, where, in addition to being preceded by “he said”, it is unmistakable from the context that the words are spoken by Jesus.

Mir,¹⁴⁸ by adopting the criteria of speaker and content, divides the Qur'ānic dialogues into five categories,¹⁴⁹ and, as far as Joseph is concerned, in the fourth category, in some dialogues the speakers consult each other about some important matter. In fact, in Q. 12:8–10 Joseph's jealous brothers discuss ways to get rid of Joseph and enjoy their father's love and affection.¹⁵⁰

Sometimes dialogues may be diversified. Q. 26:10–9 represents an emblematic example in this sense:

And when thy Lord called to Moses, "Go to the people of the evildoers, the people of Pharaoh; will they not be godfearing?" He said, "My Lord, I fear they will cry me lies, and my breast will be straitened, and my tongue will not be loosed; so send to Aaron. They also have a sin against me, and I fear they will slay me." Said He, "No indeed; but go, both of you, with Our signs, and We assuredly shall be with you, listening. So go you to Pharaoh, and say, 'Verily, I am the Messenger of the Lord of all Being; so send forth with us the Children of Israel.'" He (i.e. the Pharaoh) said, "Did we not raise thee amongst us as a child? Didst thou not tarry among us years of thy life? And thou didst the deed thou didst, being one of the ungrateful!"

Although the speakers in this pericope are God and Moses, the last verse, Q 26:18, with Pharaoh's reply introduces a new dialogue between Moses and the Pharaoh; thus the preceding verse, "so send forth with us the Children of Israel", functions as a connection between the two dialogues, given that it belongs to both. Mir says that this peculiar structure of dialogue "impart[s] continuity to the narrative by 'splicing' two passages". A similar example is found in Q. 12:80–2, when narrating the story of Joseph, in particular when Joseph's brothers have to break the news to Jacob of Benjamin's incarceration in Egypt.¹⁵¹

Indeed, the general importance of dialogue in the Qur'ān narrative, principally in the second and third Meccan periods, can be observed in the role of assuring continuity and coherence in each plot and between the various plots. This specific function is particularly evident in the story of Joseph, in Q. 12, *Sūrat Yūsuf*, the structure of which is based on a chain of dialogues¹⁵² that allows the plot to advance.

¹⁴⁸ Mir 1992: 9–11; Mir 2001: 531–2.

¹⁴⁹ The categories include: dialogues between a prophet and the nation to which he is sent; dialogues between God and prophets; dialogues situated in the hereafter; dialogues wherein the speakers consult each other about some important matter; passages where only one side of the dialogue is related.

¹⁵⁰ In Q. 27:29–35 the Queen of Sheba solicits her courtiers' views on the appropriate response to Solomon's letter.

¹⁵¹ Mir 2001: 532.

¹⁵² Q. 12:4–6: Joseph and Jacob; 12:8–10: Joseph's brothers; 12:11–4, 16–8: the brothers and Jacob; 12:23: Potiphar's wife and Joseph; 12:25–9: Potiphar's wife, Joseph, a witness of the family of Potiphar's wife and Potiphar; 12:31–3: Potiphar's wife, the Egyptian ladies and Joseph; 12:36–42:

Through the narratives of the prophets, and especially through the words spoken by them, God exemplifies and depicts the framework of the topic he wants to present to addressees of the scripture. A further meaningful function of Qur'ānic dialogues is the depiction of characters, through their behaviour (actions and reactions) and words. In the specific case of envoys, despite the fact that they are presented as elected/chosen human beings, the Qur'ān continuously stresses that they are nevertheless individuals and cannot be considered divine,¹⁵³ and such an aspect also appears when reporting direct speech which defines remarkable peculiarities and differences of their human personality.¹⁵⁴ Certainly, "Dialogue is one of the media through which the Qur'an emphasizes their humanity";¹⁵⁵ furthermore it lets readers, as well as listeners, get a remarkable insight into characters¹⁵⁶ seen as both envoys and human beings.

In Q. 12 Joseph is depicted through the coherence of the story and dialogues. Mir,¹⁵⁷ for example, categorizes two kinds of irony in Joseph's narrative: irony of event and irony of speech. The first materializes when hopes fade or fears are revealed as unfounded (mainly in the relationship between Joseph and his brothers, excluding Benjamin), but also with the misperception of reality (mainly in the relationship between Joseph and his brothers, including Benjamin), incapability of behaving in the same manner in similar situations (e.g. when Joseph's fellow prisoner forgets to mention him to the King)¹⁵⁸ or of preventing danger, even though aware of it (e.g. throughout the story, Joseph appears capable of watching out for others but not for himself), and finally when incompatible strengths reach the same result (e.g. the indifference of the traders to Joseph differs from the interest of Potiphar's wife in him).¹⁵⁹

As regards the irony of speech, a number of ironic words and expressions are found in this narrative. For instance, the word *'uṣba*, "band" (Q. 12:8), used by Joseph's brothers with reference to their plot against Joseph, actually

Joseph and his two fellow prisoners; 12:43–4: the king and his courtiers; 12:46–9: the butler and Joseph; Q 12:51: the king, the Egyptian ladies and Potiphar's wife; 12:54–5: the king and Joseph; 12:58–61: Joseph and his brothers; 12:63–7: the brothers, and Jacob; 12:70–9: the brothers, Joseph's men and Joseph; 12:80–2: the brothers among themselves; 12:83–7: the brothers and Jacob; 12:88–93: the brothers and Joseph; 12:94–5: Jacob and his neighbours; 12:96–8: the brothers and Jacob.

¹⁵³ Cf. e.g. Q. 7:35; 12:109; 14:11; 16:43; 25:20. On the human nature of the envoys, see also Q. 23:33–4; 25:7.

¹⁵⁴ According to Abdel Haleem (1999: 206) "the use of the direct speech of the unbelievers in the Qur'an is important as it records exactly what they utter so that they may be judged by what they themselves have professed rather than by what anybody has reported"; cf. e.g. Q. 22:51–69; 26:16–31.

¹⁵⁵ Mir 1992: 5.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. Quṭb 1963: 163–70.

¹⁵⁷ Mir 2000: 177–82.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Q. 12:42.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. Q. 12:20, 23–4.

gives rise to its ironic meaning when they say: “If the wolf eats him, and we a band, then are we losers!” (Q. 12:14). The word *wajh*, “face” (Q. 12:9), is also used ironically since Joseph’s brothers think that once he was out of Jacob’s sight, he would also be out of Jacob’s mind. In reality, after the disappearance of Joseph “his eyes turned white because of the sorrow that he choked within him” (Q. 12:84). Besides, before the king’s goblet could be recuperated from Benjamin’s saddlebag, Joseph’s brothers utter: “We are not robbers (*sāriqīn*)” (Q. 12:73). Then, they say: “If he is a thief, a brother of his was a thief before (*fa-qad saraqā akhun la-hu*)” (Q. 12:77). In this verse the verb *saraqā*, “to steal”, indeed, does not denote the goblet, but refers to the “stealing” of Joseph himself from his father.

In addition to all these peculiar stylistic and linguistic elements, it is obvious that the real nature of Joseph is, indeed, revealed at the beginning of the story, when he tells his father his dream: “Father, I saw eleven stars, and the sun and the moon; I saw them bowing down before me” (Q. 12:4). The repetition of “I saw (*ra’aytu*)” indicates indecisiveness and humility on Joseph’s part: he is hesitant to narrate his dream in which he has been given respect and honour from the heavenly bodies. Since he already knows the meaning of the dream, he does not want to appear presumptuous by relating it.¹⁶⁰

Prophet	Speeches			
	Meccan period		Medinan period	
	Sūra	Verses	Sūra	Verses
Joseph يوسف Yūsuf	12	4, 23, 26, 33, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 47, 48, 49, 50, 52, 53, 55, 59, 60, 62, 69, 77, 79, 89, 90, 92, 93, 99, 100, 101	/	/

The Arabic version of the Qur’ān has no punctuation and Qur’ānic verse markers (dots, strokes, circles or rosettes) represent the only punctuation.¹⁶¹ For this reason the following speeches by Joseph have been identified and extrapolated by keeping in mind and following all the stylistic characteristics and peculiarities of the Qur’ānic text, when dealing with dialogues or monologues.

¹⁶⁰ Mir 1992: 534.

¹⁶¹ The science of Qur’ānic recitation (*‘ilm al-tajwīd*), which codifies the rules for reading the Qur’ān (*qawā’id al-qirā’āt*), provided a framework for solving the problem. Moreover the placement of pauses (*waqf wa-ibtidā’*) was especially important, as pause indications fulfilled the role of punctuation, guaranteed the intelligibility of each verse’s (*āya*) semantic content and bound them into a whole; see Rezvan 2003: 604–8; Neuwirth 2002: 245–6.

In order to facilitate reading and contextualizing the different verses, it has sometimes been considered necessary to quote words/phrase (between parentheses) that immediately precede the start of the prophet's utterance, because of several peculiar Qur'ānic literary features, for instance, the shift in the level of the discourse.

The verses have been listed according to the now-standard 1924 Cairo edition, in Arabic script and with an English translation. The translations of the Qur'ānic passages are taken from Arberry's version:

 Joseph

Father, I saw eleven stars, and the sun and the moon; I saw them bowing down before me.

يَا أَبَتِ إِنِّي رَأَيْتُ أَحَدَ عَشَرَ كَوْكَبًا [12:4]
وَالشَّمْسَ وَالْقَمَرَ رَأَيْتُهُمْ لِي سَاجِدِينَ

God be my refuge, (he said). Surely my lord has given me a goodly lodging. Surely the evildoers do not prosper.

مَعَاذَ اللَّهِ إِنَّهُ رَبِّي أَحْسَنَ مَثْوَايَ إِنَّهُ لَا يُفْلِحُ الظَّالِمُونَ [12:23]

It was she that solicited me.

هِيَ رَاوَدتْنِي عَنْ نَفْسِي [12:26]

My Lord, prison is dearer to me than that they call me to; yet if Thou turnest not from me their guile, then I shall yearn towards them, and so become one of the ignorant.

رَبِّ السِّجْنِ أَحَبُّ إِلَيَّ مِمَّا يَدْعُونَنِي إِلَيْهِ [12:33]
وَأَلَّا تَصْرِفَ عَنِّي كَيْدَهُنَّ أَصْبُ إِلَيْهِنَّ وَأَكُنْ مِنَ الْجَاهِلِينَ

No food shall come to you for your sustenance, but ere it comes to you I shall tell you its interpretation. That I shall tell you is of what God has taught me. I have forsaken the creed of a people who believe not in God and who moreover are unbelievers in the world to come.

لَا يَأْتِيكُمَا طَعَامٌ تُرْزَقَانِهِ إِلَّا نَبَأَكُمَا [12:37]
بِتَأْوِيلِهِ قَبْلَ أَنْ يَأْتِيَكُمَا ذَلِكَمَا مِمَّا عَلَّمَنِي رَبِّي إِنِّي تَرَكْتُ مِلَّةَ قَوْمٍ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَهُمْ بِالْآخِرَةِ هُمْ كَافِرُونَ

And I have followed the creed of my fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Not ours is it to associate aught with God. That is of God's bounty to us, and to men; but most men are not thankful.

وَاتَّبَعْتُ مِلَّةَ آبَائِي إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْحَاقَ [12:38]
وَيَعْقُوبَ مَا كَانَ لَنَا أَنْ نُشْرِكَ بِاللَّهِ مِنْ شَيْءٍ ذَلِكَ مِنْ فَضْلِ اللَّهِ عَلَيْنَا وَعَلَى النَّاسِ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَشْكُرُونَ

Say, which is better, my fellow-prisoners – many gods at variance, or God the One, the Omnipotent?

يَا صَاحِبِي السِّجْنِ أَرَأَيْتَ إِذْ أُنزِلْتُ فِيهَا [12:39]
خَيْرٌ أَمْ اللَّهُ الْوَاحِدُ الْقَهَّارُ

That which you serve, apart from Him, is nothing but names yourselves have named, you and your fathers; God has sent down no authority touching them. Judgment belongs only to God; He has commanded that you shall not serve any but Him. That is the right religion; but most men know not.

[12:40] مَا تَعْبُدُونَ مِنْ دُونِهِ إِلَّا أَسْمَاءَ سَمَّيْتُمُوهَا أَنْتُمْ وَآبَاؤُكُمْ مَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ بِهَا مِنْ سُلْطَانٍ
 إِنْ لَكُمُ إِلَّا بِاللَّهِ أَمْرٌ أَلَّا تَعْبُدُوا إِلَّا إِيَّاهُ
 ذَلِكَ الْدِينُ الْقَيِّمُ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

Fellow-prisoners, as for one of you, he shall pour wine for his lord; as for the other, he shall be crucified, and birds will eat of his head. The matter is decided whereon you enquire.

[12:41] يَا صَاحِبِي اسْجِنْ أَمَّا أَحَدُكُمَا فَيَسْقِي رَبَّهُ خَمْرًا وَأَمَّا الْآخَرُ فَيُصَلَّبُ فَتَأْكُلُ الطَّيْرُ مِنْ رَأْسِهِ فَضِي الْأَمْرُ الَّذِي فِيهِ تَسْتَفْتِيَانِ

(Then he said to the one he deemed should be saved of the two,) Mention me in thy lord's presence.

[12:42] (وَقَالَ لِلَّذِي ظَنَّ أَنَّهُ نَاجٍ مِنْهُمَا) أُذْكَرُنِي عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ

You shall sow seven years after your wont; what you have harvested leave in the ear, excepting a little whereof you eat.

[12:47] تَزْرَعُونَ سَبْعَ سِنِينَ دَأْبًا فَمَا حَصَدْتُمْ فَذَرَوْهُ فِي سُنْبُلِهِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا مِمَّا تَأْكُلُونَ

Then thereafter there shall come upon you seven hard years, that shall devour what you have laid up for them, all but a little you keep in store.

[12:48] ثُمَّ يَأْتِي مِنْ بَعْدِ ذَلِكَ سَبْعَ شِدَادٍ يَأْكُلْنَ مَا قَدَّمْتُمْ لَهُنَّ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا مِمَّا تَحْصِنُونَ

Then thereafter there shall come a year wherein the people will be succoured and press in season.

[12:49] ثُمَّ يَأْتِي مِنْ بَعْدِ ذَلِكَ عَامٌ فِيهِ يُغَاثُ النَّاسُ وَفِيهِ يَعْصِرُونَ

Return unto thy lord, and ask of him, "What of the women who cut their hands?" Surely my Lord has knowledge of their guile.

[12:50] ارْجِعْ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ فَاسْأَلْهُ مَا بَالُ النِّسْوَةِ اللَّاتِي قَطَّعْنَ أَيْدِيَهُنَّ إِنَّ رَبِّي بِكَيْدِهِنَّ عَلِيمٌ

That, so that he may know I betrayed him not secretly, and that God guides not the guile of the treacherous.

[12:52] ذَلِكَ لِيَعْلَمَ أَنِّي لَمْ أَخُنْهُ بِالْغَيْبِ وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِي كَيْدَ الْخَائِنِينَ

Yet I claim not that my soul was innocent – surely the soul of man incites to evil – except inasmuch as my Lord had mercy; truly my Lord is All-forgiving, All-compassionate.

[12:53] وَمَا أُبْرئُ نَفْسِي إِنَّ النَّفْسَ لَأَمَّارَةٌ بِالسُّوءِ إِلَّا مَا رَحِمَ رَبِّي إِنَّ رَبِّي غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ

(The king said, 'Bring him to me!')
Set me over the land's storehouses;
I am a knowing guardian.

[12:(54)55] وَقَالَ الْمَلِكُ ائْتُونِي بِهِ اِجْعَلْنِي عَلَى
خَزَائِنِ الْأَرْضِ إِنِّي حَفِيظٌ عَلَيْمُ

Bring me a certain brother of yours
from your father. Do you not see
that I fill up the measure, and am
the best of hosts?

[12:59] ائْتُونِي بِأَخٍ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَبِيكُمْ أَلَا تَرَوْنَ أَنِّي
أَوْفِي الْكَيْلِ وَأَنَا خَيْرُ الْمُنْزِلِينَ

But if you bring him not to me,
there shall be no measure for you
with me, neither shall you come
nigh me.

[12:60] فَإِنْ لَمْ تَأْتُونِي بِهِ فَلَا كَيْلَ لَكُمْ عِنْدِي وَلَا
تَقْرَبُونِ

(He said to his pages,) Put their
merchandise in their saddlebags;
haply they will recognize it when
they have turned to their people;
haply they will return.

[12:62] (وَقَالَ لِفِتْيَانِهِ) اِجْعَلُوا بِضَاعَتَهُمْ فِي
رِحَالِهِمْ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَعْرِفُونَهَا إِذَا انْقَلَبُوا إِلَى
أَهْلِهِمْ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ

I am thy brother; so do not despair
of that they have done.

[12:69] إِنِّي أَنَا أَخُوكَ فَلَا تَبْتَئِسْ بِمَا كَانُوا
يَعْمَلُونَ

You are in a worse case; God knows
very well what you are describing.

[12:77] أَنْتُمْ شَرُّ مَكَانًا وَاللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا تَصِفُونَ

God forbid that we should take any
other but him in whose possession
we found the goods; for if we did
so, we would be evildoers.

[12:79] مَعَاذَ اللَّهِ أَنْ نَأْخُذَ إِلَّا مَنْ وَجَدْنَا مَتَاعَنَا
عِنْدَهُ إِنَّا إِذًا لَطَالِمُونَ

Are you aware of what you did
with Joseph and his brother, when
you were ignorant?

[12:89] هَلْ عَلِمْتُمْ مَا فَعَلْتُمْ بِيُوسُفَ وَأَخِيهِ إِذْ
أَنْتُمْ جَاهِلُونَ

I am Joseph, (he said.) This is my
brother. God has indeed been gracious
unto us. Whosoever fears God, and
is patient – surely God leaves not to
waste the wage of the good-doers.

[12:90] أَنَا يُوسُفُ وَهَذَا أَخِي قَدْ مَنَّ اللَّهُ عَلَيْنَا إِنَّهُ
مَنْ يَتَّقِ وَيَصْبِرْ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُضِيعُ أَجْرَ
الْمُحْسِنِينَ

No reproach this day shall be on
you; God will forgive you; He is
the most merciful of the merciful.

[12:92] لَا تَثْرِبَ عَلَيْكُمْ أَيُّومَ يَغْفِرُ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ وَهُوَ
أَرْحَمُ الرَّاحِمِينَ

Go, take this shirt, and do you cast
it on my father's face, and he shall
recover his sight; then bring me
your family all together.

[12:93] اذْهَبُوا بِقَمِيصِي هَذَا فَأَلْقُوهُ عَلَى وَجْهِ
أَبِي يَأْتِ بِبَصِيرًا وَأْتُونِي بِأَهْلِكُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ

Enter you into Egypt, if God will, in security.

أَدْخُلُوا مِصْرَ إِنْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ آمِنِينَ [12:99]

See, father, (he said,) this is the interpretation of my vision of long ago; my Lord has made it true. He was good to me when He brought me forth from the prison, and again when He brought you out of the desert, after that Satan set at variance me and my brethren. My Lord is gentle to what He will; He is the All-knowing, the All-wise.

هَذَا تَأْوِيلُ رُؤْيَايَ مِنْ قَبْلُ قَدْ جَعَلَهَا رَبِّي حَقًّا وَقَدْ أَحْسَنَ بِي إِذْ أَخْرَجَنِي مِنَ السِّجْنِ وَجَاءَ بِكُمْ مِنَ الْبَدْوِ مِنْ بَعْدِ أَنْ نَزَعَ الشَّيْطَانُ بَيْنِي وَبَيْنَ إِخْوَتِي إِنَّ رَبِّي لَطِيفٌ لِمَا يَشَاءُ إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْعَلِيمُ الْحَكِيمُ [12:100]

O my Lord, Thou hast given me to rule, and Thou hast taught me the interpretation of tales. O Thou, the Originator of the heavens and earth, Thou art my Protector in this world and the next. O receive me to Thee in true submission, and join me with the righteous.

رَبِّ قَدْ آتَيْتَنِي مِنَ الْمُلْكِ وَعَلَّمْتَنِي مِنْ تَأْوِيلِ الْأَحَادِيثِ فَاطِرَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ أَنْتَ وَلِيِّ فِى الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ تَوَفَّنِي مُسْلِمًا وَأَلْحِقْنِي بِالصَّالِحِينَ [12:101]

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