CHAPTER 12

Sūrat Yūsuf (XII) and Some of Its Possible Jewish Sources

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12.1 Introduction

This is a story about a story; this is a history of a sacred story and how it was shaped in Jewish and Islamic sources. Here is a tale of how a story was developed and was embellished during the course of its transmission among Jews and Muslims. The aim of this study is to discuss some of the possible sources of Sūrat Yūsuf (XII).1 Needless to say, there is no intention to discuss the broader picture of the relationships between the Jews and Islam in its formative stages. This is a very confined research on some details that are mentioned in this sura, and there is no intention whatsoever to infer any generalizations.

Sūrat Yūsuf is a well-known kind of biblical story that was retold and rewritten in the Qurʾān.2 It tells the story of Joseph and his brothers, a story that is considered to be “the best of all tales” of humankind (Q. 12:3); at least the narrator of the Qurʾān as well as Leo Tolstoy thought so. It is so famous that there is no need to present it in detail: Joseph was sold by his brothers to Ishmaelites and taken to Egypt. As a slave Joseph was accused of being a rapist and went to jail, but by his cleverness he became the viceroy and later saved his brothers and the whole family was reunited. Jealousy, hatred, sex, dream interpretation, famine, and good luck can generate a very good story. This is the story that tells how the Jews came to Egypt in the first place, so one can understand why the narrative is in the Bible. Because of its other merits, most likely, the story became part of the Qurʾān, as did other biblical stories.


The relationships between the different narratives have been analyzed for more than a century and a half, and many studies have been dedicated to the whole story or to some of its parts. However, the goal of this paper is not to summarize previous studies but rather to discuss the issue from a different aspect, one that as far as I am able to ascertain, has not yet been noted. First, one should be aware of the process of retelling the Bible, an aspect of which scholars who deal with post-Biblical literature are fully aware but that somehow lost its appeal when turning to the Qurʾān. The second aspect is what may be called the “tradition and transmission” school of thought, which originated in Scandinavia and yielded studies that try to understand how oral literature came to be written, how traditions were transmitted through a process of changing, and so on. It seems that this method of understanding is quite adequate for the question before us concerning traditions in at least three languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic—as will be discussed below. Let us begin the discussion with a detail that is neither in the biblical story nor in the Talmud, yet even so is quite famous: The Women's Feast.

12.2 The Women’s Feast

Joseph was led to Egypt, and there he was sold to an Egyptian whose wife fell in love with Joseph. These details are well known from the Bible, but in a later narrative—both Jewish and Qurʾānic—it is stated that the Egyptian’s wife wanted to explain to her female friends why she fell in love with Joseph.

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3 For the time being, see Louis Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1955), vol. 5, 339–40 n. 118, where Ginzberg brings parallels of the story and indicates: “the Jewish origin of the legend as given in Tan. is beyond dispute.”
