CHAPTER 2

The Wiles of Women, The Guile of Men: Re-reading Kayd in Sūrat Yūsuf

Zainab Mahmood

Although the twelfth sura of the Quran presents the story of Yūsuf (the Biblical Joseph) and his ascent to the ranks of prophethood, it is also primarily a tale of stratagems. When Yūsuf relates to his father the news of his portentous dream of eleven stars, the moon and the sun bowing in prostration to him, his father immediately warns him of the jealous plotting that will follow should this vision become known to his other sons. Yaʿqūb’s suspicions about Yūsuf’s brothers, which lead him to request that Yūsuf remain silent on the matter of the dream, prove well founded: the first half of the sura details a sequence of machinations centering on the fate of his innocent son. First, Yūsuf’s brothers petition their father, asking that Yūsuf be entrusted to them for an afternoon of picnic and pastime. Couching their invitation in amiable, seemingly affectionate and even imploring language, the brothers reassure their anxious father that they will be good protectors for the boy on the outing, concealing both their deep-seated jealousy concerning Yaʿqūb’s clear preference of Yūsuf over them and their ultimate plan of abduction. The brothers resolve to place Yūsuf at the bottom of a well, where he is discovered by a passing band of caravaneers and sold into slavery in Egypt; there, he is made once again the object of wily designs. Although the governor of Egypt (al-ʿAzīz) acquires Yūsuf with

1 Arberry (trans.), The Koran interpreted, sub 12:4. All translations are from Arberry and are cited by the sura and verse number, unless otherwise indicated.
2 Q Yūsuf 12:5, “He said, ‘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.’”
3 Q 12:12, “‘Send him forth with us tomorrow, to frolic and play; surely we shall be watching over him.’”
4 Q 12:14, “They said, ‘If the wolf eats him, and we are a band, then are we losers!’”
5 Q 12:8, “‘Surely Joseph and his brother are dearer to our father than we, though we are a band. Surely our father is in manifest error.’”
6 Q 12:9–10, “‘Kill 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 traveler will pick him out, if you do aught.’”
good intentions, entrusting to his wife\(^7\) the responsibility of treating the newcomer hospitably and considering the possibility of adopting him as a son,\(^8\) she decides instead to seduce the youth. Seeking to entrap Yusuf into granting her desires, she ignores his invocation of God for protection against error and attempts instead to press on with her self-serving plan;\(^9\) she further assigns the blame of seduction to Yusuf when the two are discovered alone together by her husband.\(^10\) The women of Egypt also become involved in her scheme. Accepting an invitation for a banquet from al-ʿAzīz’s wife, they are sequestered with Yusuf and provide confirmation to his mistress of his peerless attractiveness, from which she draws the encouragement to persist in the extortion of her bond-servant.\(^11\)

It was from such crafty scheming that Yaʿqūb wished to protect his son when he stated, “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.”\(^12\) The Arabic term \textit{yakīdū}, translated by Arberry as the devising of guile, derives from the tri-literal root \textit{k-y-d} that appears again to mark critical moments throughout the developing story. After the brothers do in fact hatch a scheme to cast Yusuf out of their land, bearing out Yaʿqūb’s stated fear of such ploys, the term is again used when Yusuf’s shirt, torn in the back, serves as proof of Zulaykhā’s dishonest claim that she was the one fleeing from an unwelcome advance. Her husband then remarks, as translated by Arberry, “This is of your women’s guile (\textit{kaydikunna}); surely your guile (\textit{kaydakunna}) is great.”\(^13\) Despite exacting an apology to Yusuf from his wife, al-ʿAzīz appears to do nothing to mete out any

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{7} The wife of al-ʿAzīz is unnamed in the Quran, but the Muslim commentarial traditions most often refer to her as “Zulaykhā” and that is how she will be referred to in this essay.
\item\textsuperscript{8} Q 12:21, “He that bought him, being of Egypt, said to his wife, ‘Give him goodly lodging, and it may be that he will profit us, or we may take him for our own son.’”
\item\textsuperscript{9} Q 12:23, “Now the woman in whose house he was solicited him, and closed the doors on them. ‘Come,’ she said, ‘take me!’ ‘God be my refuge,’ he said. ‘Surely my lord has given me a goodly lodging. Surely the evildoers do not prosper.’”
\item\textsuperscript{10} Q 12:25, “They raced to the door; and she tore his shirt from behind. They encountered her master by the door. She said, ‘What is the recompense of him who purposes evil against thy folk, but that he should be imprisoned, or a painful chastisement?’”
\item\textsuperscript{11} Q 12:32, “So now you see,’ she said. ‘This is he you blamed me for. Yes, I solicited him, but he abstained. Yet if he will not do what I command him, he shall be imprisoned, and be one of the humbled.’”
\item\textsuperscript{12} Q 12:5, “He said, ‘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.’”
\item\textsuperscript{13} Q 12:28, “When he saw his shirt was torn from behind he said, ‘This is of your women’s guile; surely your guile is great.’”
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