

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

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## 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).<sup>1</sup> 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 Qur'ān.<sup>2</sup> 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 Qur'ān 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

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<sup>1</sup> For the most recent study on this sura, see Joseph Witztum, “Joseph among the Ishmaelites: Q 12 In Light of Syriac Sources,” in *New Perspectives on the Qur'an: The Qur'an in Its Historical Context*, vol. 2, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (London: Routledge, 2011), 425–48. For more theoretical views and studies, see John C. Reeves, ed., *Bible and Qur'an: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Philip S. Alexander, “Retelling the Old Testament,” in *It Is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture*, eds. D.A. Carson and H.G.M. Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 99–121; James H. Charlesworth, “In the Crucible: The Pseudepigrapha as Biblical Interpretation,” in *The Pseudepigrapha and Early Biblical Interpretation*, eds. James H. Charlesworth and Craig A. Evans, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 20–43.

can understand why the narrative is in the Bible. Because of its other merits, most likely, the story became part of the Qur'ān, 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 Qur'ān. The second aspect is what may be called the “tradition and transmission” school of thought,<sup>4</sup> 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.

### **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 Qur'ānic—it is stated that the Egyptian's wife wanted to explain to her female friends why she fell in love with Joseph.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> 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.”

<sup>4</sup> Geo Widengren, “Tradition and Literature in Early Judaism and in the Early Church,” *NUMEN* X (1963): 42–83; Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*, 2nd ed. (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1964); Y. Zakovitch, “From Oral to Written Tale in the Bible” [Hebrew], *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore* 1 (1981): 9–43; Margaret A. Mills, “Oral Tradition,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd edn., ed. Lindsay Jones (New York: Thomson Gale, 2005), 6842–46.

<sup>5</sup> Many scholars have written about this narrative, and the following are some basic studies: James L. Kugel, *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), 28–65; Shalom L. Goldman, *The Wives of Women / The Wives of Men* (New

The Qur'ān states (12:30–31):

Some women in the city said: “The wife of the great man solicits her page for herself; he has smitten her heart with love; verily we consider her to be in manifest error.” So when she heard the cunning (talk) she sent (a message) to them, and prepared for them a feast, and to each of them she gave a knife. Then she said (to Yūsuf) “Come forth to them!” So when they saw him they were so astonished at him, that they cut their hands; they said: “Saving Allah’s presence! This is not a man; this is nothing but a noble angel.”<sup>6</sup>

While one can understand that Potiphar’s wife wants to show her female friends her new good-looking slave with whom she wants to make love, it is not clear from the story why she gave knives to her friends.

Muqātil b. Sulaymān al-Balkhī (d. 767 CE) wrote an exegesis to the Qur'ān in which he showed his deep debt to Jewish sources, Talmudic legends, and midrash.<sup>7</sup> In his *tafsīr* he writes that Zulaikha made a feast for the wives of five viziers, and the women were peeling citrons (*citrus media*, in Hebrew: etrog) with their knives while watching the beauty of Joseph and as a result cut their hands. This tradition is well known in the standard edition of Midrash Tanḥūmā, where it reads: “What did Potiphar’s wife do? She took etrogim and gave them to each of them, and she gave a knife to each of them.”<sup>8</sup> The problem now is twofold: 1) Is the Tanḥūmā an earlier midrash that predates the Qur'ān, or vice versa? In other words: was this story composed by Jews or by Muslims? 2) Why were the women given knives and citrons in that feast, and how did it happen that they all cut themselves on such an occasion? What is the rationale behind the story?

Regarding the first question, the dating of Midrash Tanḥūmā is far from clear. It is named after an R. Tanḥuma bar Abba who lived in the Land of Israel in the fourth

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York: State University of New York Press, 1995); Marc S. Bernstein, *Stories of Joseph: Narrative Migrations between Judaism and Islam* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2006), esp. 24, 232–34.

<sup>6</sup> *The Qur'an*, trans. Richard Bell (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937).

<sup>7</sup> Amnon Moalem, “Jews and Judaism in Muqātil ibn Sulayman’s Exegesis to the Qur'ān: Historical and Polemic Aspects” [Hebrew] (MA diss., Bar-Ilan University, 2002), 26.

<sup>8</sup> *Midrash Tanḥūmā*, *vaYeshev* 5, first edition Constantinople 1520-1522, facsimile Jerusalem 1971. The text does not appear in the Buber edition.

century; that is prior the Qur'ān, no doubt, but on the other hand, in the Tanhūmā there are texts that clearly come from a post-Qur'ānic period. Therefore, one cannot rely on the date of the Tanhūmā, and this is probably the main reason why thus far the relationship between our Jewish and Muslim sources has been vague. This situation changed when Aramaic poems from the Cairo Genizah were published quite recently, but before we discuss this source, a few words are needed concerning the place of the Targumim in the Jews' ancient liturgy.

In the Talmudic period, Jews not only read the Torah as a written text in synagogues but also translated the Torah simultaneously into Aramaic during the oral performances. Jews had several Targumim, among them the Pseudo-Jonathan, (erroneously) named after Jonathan ben Uziel, a sage who lived in the first century CE.<sup>9</sup> This Targum is not an exact translation but rather a more “developed” literary genre, and though there are some late additions in the text, it is basically believed to come from the early centuries of the Common Era with the Aramaic dialect (or social circle) that was known to the author of the Book of Revelation in the New Testament.<sup>10</sup>

This Targum contains an unknown number of poems. That is to say that there are some tens of Aramaic poems (Piyutim) that were incorporated into the Targum and were sung or chanted during the course of the reading of the Torah. Since that is the nature of these additions, the Aramaic poems do not appear to merge together with the “regular” text. It is therefore not surprising that many of the poems were lost. However, in the Middle Ages in Italy and France many Jews sang these poems, though naturally not all the communities knew the whole corpus of the Aramaic poems. The exact number of these poems is far from being known, for it is clear that the study of these poems is in its initial stage.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For a recent introduction to the Targumim, see Paul V. M. Flesher and Bruce Chilton, *The Targums: A Critical Introduction* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Martin McNamara, *The New Testament and the Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch*, (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1966), 97–112, 117–25.

<sup>11</sup> For a comparative study, see Alphons S. Rodrigues Pereira, *Studies in Aramaic Poetry (c. 100 B.C.E. – c. 600 C.E.), Selected Jewish, Christian, and Samaritan Poems* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1997). For an overview of the relevant literature, see also Alberdina Houtman and Harry Sysling, *Alternative Targum Traditions: The Use of Variant Readings for the Study in Origin and History of Targum Jonathan* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 50–54.

Though some of these Aramaic poems were known to the Jewish modern reader through European manuscripts and Ashkenazic prayer books, the Cairo Genizah helped scholars to understand this phenomenon more precisely. In the Genizah several tens of such poems were discovered, and recently they were edited and translated into Hebrew.<sup>12</sup> One of these poems is our concern here.

This Aramaic poem is built as an alphabetical acrostic. It tells that Potiphar's wife invited her female friends to a feast. They were holding knives and etrogim while they watched Joseph, and, shocked by the handsome slave's beauty, they cut their hands. Concerning the date of this poem and its counterparts, the situation is clear: the Aramaic texts are full of Greek words, and there is no doubt that these poems come from the Byzantine era, around the fourth to sixth centuries. That is to say, once and for all, the argument is settled: The Aramaic poem in which the narrative of the women's feast appears predated the Qur'ān, so it is clear that the ladies' feast in the Qur'ān is based on a Jewish source, and not vice versa. Going back to Tanḥūmā, it should be noted that it is built on many sources, and it is clear that its editor translated some of his sources from Aramaic into Hebrew,<sup>13</sup> so the "new" Aramaic poem joins other Aramaic excerpts that were translated into Hebrew and edited by the author of Midrash Tanḥūmā.

After the question of the source is settled, we can delve into the other question: how did it happen that all the women who participated in the feast cut themselves? Why would Potiphar's wife give her friends etrogim and knives in the first place, or knives only, according to the Qur'ān, which sounds even more bizarre? Moreover, being cut accidentally is a well-known human experience, but the idea that all participants had the same accident at the same time seems improbable. How and why did the narrator claim such an event had ever happened?

It seems that the solution was given by two Qur'ānic commentators, and their explanation is supported now by a few Babylonian Talmud sources, as will be explained below. According to two commentators of the Qur'ān, al-Māwardī (tenth

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Sokoloff and Joseph Yahalom, *Jewish Aramaic Poetry from Late Antiquity* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1999), 136–41; Meir Bar-Ilan, "Aramaic Piyutim from the Land of Israel and Their *Sitz im Leben*: J. Yahalom and M. Sokoloff, Shirat Benei Maaraba" [Hebrew], *Mahut* 23 (2001): 167–88.

<sup>13</sup> M. Margulies, *Midrash Wayyikra Rabbah: Introduction* (Jerusalem: The American Academy for Jewish Research, 1960), xiv–xv.

and eleventh century) and al-Qurṭubī (thirteenth century), the women at the feast saw blood of menstruation that flowed from them because of sexual arousal caused by the handsome slave.<sup>14</sup> According to this concept, just as a man can ejaculate while watching a nice-looking woman, so a woman can have menstrual blood by looking at a nice-looking man. Not being an authority on human physiology, it is not for me to state whether this concept is true or false. What is more important here is that this concept, a woman menstruating due to sexual arousal, is known in the Talmud. In (BT Niddah 20b, 66a) the term is called “*dam ḥimud*,” that is: “blood of lust.” More than that, R. Yoḥanan (Land of Israel, d. 279) states:

For when Nebuchadnezzar, the wicked man, exiled Israel, there were young men who outshone the sun in their beauty. Chaldean women would see them and reach orgasm [from the mere gaze]. They told their husbands and their husbands told the king. The king ordered them killed. Still, the wives would reach orgasm [merely from laying eyes on the corpses]. The king gave an order and they trampled [the corpses beyond all recognition] (BT Sanhedrin 92b).<sup>15</sup>

The Hebrew expression that is translated here for lack of a better alternative as “reaching orgasm” is שופעות זבות, which means “having a vaginal discharge.” In Mishnah Niddah 9:8 the discharge is seen as a possible sign of approaching menstruation. According to this line of thought of both Muslim and Jewish

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<sup>14</sup> Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Muḥammad b. Ḥabīb al-Māwardī, *al-Hāwī al-Kabīr*, 22 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr), 1:463; Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Abī Bakr al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li-Aḥkām al-Qur’ān*, 10 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1965), 3:82. Haggai Mazuz, “Menstruation and Its Legislation: The Evolution and Crystallization of the Law of Menses in the Islamic Juristic Tradition” [Hebrew] (PhD diss., Bar-Ilan University, 2010), 57; Haggai Mazuz, “Midrashic Influence on Islamic Folklore: The Case of Menstruation,” *Studia Islamica* 108 (2013): 189–201. Goldman, *The Wives* (see note 5 above) quotes al-Bayḍāwī (d. 1280), who gives another interpretation to *akbarna* (literally: matured, as a euphemism for menstruate). However, former scholars were not aware of the rabbinic sources discussed here.

<sup>15</sup> Jacob Neusner, *The Talmud of Babylonia: An American Translation XXII: Tractate Sanhedrin Chapters 9–11* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 105. The literal translation is “they began to menstruate profusely,” but the plain meaning is that they reached an orgasm, as Neusner wrote, since in antiquity there was not a word for this intimate moment. The same concept also appears in G. Reeg, *Die Geschichte von den Zehn Märtyrern* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1985), 47\*.

commentaries (a rare combination, indeed), it is time to go back to our story to realize that according to this commentary there was no need of any knives at the women's feast, because the blood could have been caused by sexual arousal. One wonders how the knives entered the story. Before explaining this minute detail, the question now is: what was the reason etrogim were brought to the feast in the first place (in the Jewish and Muslim sources, not in the Qur'ān)?

The reason for having etrogim at the women's feast is simple, since in antiquity, among the Jews, the etrog was considered to be an aphrodisiac, a fruit that strengthens one's lust for intercourse. In other words, the etrog was considered to be the right fruit at the right time for women watching a handsome slave. There is no explicit statement that enhances the sexual characteristics of the etrog, but still the aforementioned concept derives from a few sources. First and foremost is R. Abba from Acre (third century) who said that when Eve, in the Garden of Eden "saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes" (Gen 3:6), this fruit—the literal translation of its nature is "lust to the eyes"—is no other than the etrog.<sup>16</sup> So if the fruit with which Eve seduced Adam was not an aphrodisiac (without mentioning this concept), I doubt what the concept of an aphrodisiac is all about. Moreover, Shemuel, one of the greatest Amoraim in Babylonia (third century), stated that the High Priest was not allowed to eat etrog the day before the Day of Atonement, since he had to stay pure, and eating etrog (like milk and eggs) causes one to ejaculate easily.<sup>17</sup> In sum, Potiphar's wife gave her female friends etrogim because of its unique character to arouse sexual lust, evident in an abrupt discharge of blood, especially while looking at a good-looking man.

Now, with the variants of the interpretation of the story, it is time to delve deeper into it. We can see that there are three options to explain the women's bleeding: 1) to give them knives and etrogim (Aramaic poem); 2) to give them knives (Qur'ān); or 3) to give them etrogim and a handsome lad to watch (Muslim commentators). These different opinions lead one to realize the process of tradition and transmission the story had passed through and eventually to understand how these versions evolved.

It is assumed that the original story, which was an oral homily (as part of the Targum), was about a women's feast where they were given etrogim while watching

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<sup>16</sup> *Genesis Rabba* 15:2 Theodor Albeck edition, p. 140.

<sup>17</sup> Y. Yoma 1:4 39a.

the handsome slave and they began to discharge blood as a result of sexual arousal. However, the transmitter did not understand the whole story, either because he did not comprehend “bleeding” as a euphemism or he was not aware of the concept of “blood of lust.” He was probably also not aware of the etrog as an aphrodisiac. Therefore, the transmitter added knives to the story, to explain the cause of bleeding. However, in a later phase, in the Qur’ān, the transmitter was not aware of the characteristics of etrog at all (perhaps he did not know what an etrog is) and left the story with knives only.

As a matter of fact, there is no need to hypothesize an old version (maybe an urtext) of the Piyyut, since we have it in a different version where there are no knives and no etrogim. This version is known from the Italian liturgy as well as from France, both from about the thirteenth century.<sup>18</sup> In this spicy tale, “improving” the Bible with more words and situations, at the very beginning the lady asks Joseph “to plough in my garden,” an expression already taken by the medieval commentator as a euphemism.<sup>19</sup> Later, there is another expression: “several times I have cleaned my vessel,” and again the Italian commentator took it as a euphemism. After that, the women were watching Joseph and two crucial words appear: ואפיהון מכרמין, that is, literally: their faces became faded-red. In Rabbinic Hebrew this expression means becoming red after being bashful. However, this interpretation cannot be taken here since the whole scene is erotic: ladies are watching a handsome lad who pours wine in their glasses while sitting on silk carpets woven with gold. Moreover, the landlady tells the lad קום קטור זינך which is literally “gird up thy loins” (as this expression is translated in the English Bible), but it may easily be taken as “prepare your dick” (and I apologize to the reader for using a four-letter word in an academic paper; b. Berahot 62a). The text continues with ושמש כעבדא—words that might be translated in two ways: either as “serve as a slave,” or in a different way that I save the ink so as not to

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<sup>18</sup> Shimon Horowitz (ed.), *Mahzor Witri* (Nierenberg 1923), I, p. 342 (commentary on p. 334); Menahem H. Schmelzer, *Studies in Jewish Bibliography and Medieval Hebrew Poetry: Collected Essays* (New York and Jerusalem: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2006), Hebrew section, p. 88 (commentary on p. 59).

<sup>19</sup> According to Schmelzer, the name of the commentator is R. Binyamin min ha-Anavim. However, I. Peles brought strong evidence that there were several commentators in Rome, and the compiler of the commentary was R. Moshe Ferrara. See Israel M. Peles, “The Commentary of the Alphabetin Piyyutim Attributed to the Family of ‘Shibolei Haleqet’ and R. Moshe b. R. Meir Ferrara” [Hebrew], *Zakhor Leabraham*, vol. 1, ed. Abigdor Berger (Holon: Yeshivat Eliyahu, 2002), 23–48.

embarrass the paper. In other words, this is not the place or time where women, who initiated the event, might be made bashful by a handsome stranger; this is an erotic scene.

All this leads one to acknowledge that the vocabulary here has a double meaning—a phenomenon that is typical in sexual affairs, especially when one takes into consideration that these words were said in a holy place and before an audience that may have included some youngsters. This atmosphere should lead us to assume that the crucial words here serve as a euphemism, and before we discuss lexicography, one should keep in mind that in oral transmission body language has its own merit, and with a slight posture or gesture, a word or a concept that seems blurred, especially in sex matters, becomes clear on the spot.

Now, the narrator did not use the word “red,” rather he made (as in Hebrew) a verb out of the noun “karkom,” which is *Crocus*, a genus of flowering plants in the iris family. According to Maimonides (on m. Niddah 2:6), when one puts the “onion” of the flower into water, the water turns faded red, like blood. Furthermore, in m. Niddah 2:6–7 (b. Niddah 19a), it is stated that there are five different hues of blood that come from a menstruating woman, and one of them is karkom—that is, crocus.<sup>20</sup> In the same Mishnah Niddah (2:3), discussing vaginal blood, the sage talked about a woman who washed her face, and Maimonides explains that this is a euphemism, famous in the world of the sages (so he does not need to explain it). All this leads one to interpret the Aramaic narrative as “while the women were watching Joseph, their (lower) faces became faded-red (or yellowish)” —that is, they menstruated. In other words, the original story was told about women who bleed without the aid of knives and etrogim, and just by watching the handsome lad they menstruated (or maybe better: they had vaginal secretions).

It must be admitted that the language is ambiguous and therefore the interpretation given here has thus far not been given earlier, probably for more than one reason: lack of knowledge concerning erotic scenes because of a pious background, misunderstanding the double meaning of the words, or because of lack of knowledge of (deep) rabbinic ideas concerning blood of lust. Now one of the transmitters—who

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<sup>20</sup> Before the commentator stood another version: אפיה ירקין, literally “their faces became green” (that is, actually yellowish). In m. Eduyot 5:6 (b. Sanhedrin 87b; b. Niddah 19b; ibid. 33a), there is a dispute between the sages whether a vaginal green (=yellowish) blood turns one impure.

was a *paytan* and translator—was aware of the ambiguity of the words, so he “translated” the words “became red” into “began to bleed.” A later transmitter did not understand what the source of the bleeding was, so he added knives to make it clear. Now, knives by themselves are not enough, so etrogim, an aphrodisiac, were added, and now the whole scene became clearer, at least from the transmitter’s point of view.<sup>21</sup>

In looking at the different versions of the text, we have to realize that we are not looking at mere scribal mistakes. On the contrary, the differences come from deliberate changes made by several transmitters, through the ages, who with their creativity tried their best to clarify the narratives for the benefit of their audience, but not necessarily successfully. In oral tradition there was no “final text” which the transmitter was responsible to reproduce, but rather the text was fluid, and each and every version of the narrative we watch was a “station” in the history of the transmission of the story. Alas, the original meaning of the narrative got lost, and only after a thorough analysis can one get into the deeper meaning of the story.

Thus we can trace the genealogy of the story and surmise that the most ancient version known today is the version that was known to European Jewry in the thirteenth century, without knives and etrogim, while the Aramaic poem from the Genizah is a “developed” and corrupted phase of the original story (probably third century).<sup>22</sup> The story was transmitted (probably as an Aramaic poem) over and over again, first as an erotic narrative: women watching a nice lad<sup>23</sup> without the help of an

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<sup>21</sup> The commentator made his commentary on a text without knives and etrogim, but it did not stop him from integrating them into his commentary. However, at the very end of the text he wrote that he has a different ending of the Piyyut, with etrogim and knives (that were corrupted into סמנין by a scribal error).

<sup>22</sup> The idea that an etrog is an aphrodisiac is attested in a text from the third century, and the idea that a handsome lad can cause a woman to menstruate comes from the same period (in two different narratives). That is to say, we have three “testimonies” that coalesce to persuade the modern reader that the story of Potiphar’s wife’s feast originated in the third century if not earlier.

<sup>23</sup> Such a story might be derived from reality. However, in the book of Esther (1:9) it is stated that the king made a feast for all of his dignitaries (men), while the queen made a similar feast for the women (assumedly the dignitaries’ wives). During the feast the king ordered for the queen to appear with her crown, and later Rabbis explained that she had to appear clad in her crown only (BT Megillah 12b). Given this idea, and thinking of the feast of women, one may assume that the women also wanted to amuse themselves with a handsome male. In

aphrodisiac, the etrog. Then the story was “improved” and etrogim were added, and for their sake knives were added too, all to clarify the situation, hence with less erotic appeal; without lust-bleeding. A later narrator translated the story into Arabic and left out the etrogim. The same Aramaic poem was translated by the Jews (in a different land) into Hebrew, and the poem became a story in Midrash Tanḥūmā. In all, during this process of transmitting the narrative, the erotic appeal was diminished. Medieval Hebrew midrashim embellished the feast narrative with fruits and meat, and thus the erotic elements of the narrative almost disappeared. How can one dare to think of an erotic scene in a corpus of a sacred text?<sup>24</sup>

In sum, here is a story about a story (a women’s feast) that was incorporated within a great narrative (Joseph and his brothers). Being aware of the tradition and transmission school makes one realize how different versions of the story may have evolved, each from the former.

The following chart sums up the assumed development of the narrative:

*Women’s feast*

	<b>Language</b>	<b>Source</b>	<b>Story</b>	<b>Date</b>
1	Aramaic	Targum-Poem Europe	a lad caused lust-bleeding	3rd c.
2	Aramaic	Targum-Poem Genizah	etrogim + knives caused bleeding	4–5th c.
3	Hebrew	Tanḥūmā	etrogim + knives caused bleeding	6–8th c.
4	Arabic	Qur’ān	(without fruit) knives caused bleeding	7th c.
5	Arabic	Muslim commentators	etrogim + knives + lust-bleeding	10–11th c.

**Joseph’s Trial**

In the biblical story it is stated that Joseph, while running from his mistress, left his torn garment in her hands. He was put in jail, but there is no reference to his trial. It should be noted that the biblical legislator writes about an accusation of rape of a married woman, which seems to be punishable by the death of the rapist (Deut 22:25–

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other words, the narrative discussed here seems to be quite plausible, rooted in ancient gender behavior and erotic fantasy and history.

<sup>24</sup> Compare a “similar” case of Song of Songs.

26). However, in our narrative, Joseph was sent to jail, and one wonders how and why he was saved. Therefore, some post-Biblical narrators added a scene where it becomes evident to everybody that he was innocent. This addendum to the text that makes the narrative more comprehensible focuses on the trial Joseph had to undergo in order to convince the judges that he was attacked and not vice versa, as would seem more likely.

This trial episode is known in the Qur'ān, on the one hand, and in three different Hebrew texts on the other hand. This needs to be evaluated concerning the question who borrowed from whom?

The Qur'ān text (Sura 12:26–27) reads as follows:<sup>25</sup> “If his shirt is torn from before, she has spoken the truth, and he is one of those who speak falsely. But if his shirt is torn from behind, she has spoken falsely, and he is one of those who speak the truth.”

The three Hebrew texts that mention the trial episode are as follows: 1) Midrash Abkir, 2) Midrash Aggada, and 3) Sefer ha-Yashar. Let us first look at these texts independently and then at the sources comparatively. 1) Midrash Abkir is a lost midrash from which only excerpts have survived as evidence of its existence, most of them surviving in Yalqut Shimoni, a compilation of several midrashim, assumed to have been assembled in Europe (Frankfurt?) around the eleventh or twelfth century. However, the trial episode from Midrash Abkir survived in a commentary on the Torah written by R. Ephraim of Regensburg (1110-1175).<sup>26</sup> Midrash Abkir is assumed to be from southern Italy in the tenth century.<sup>27</sup> 2) Midrash Aggada is known from one manuscript only (purchased by Huntington in Aleppo), and its source is unknown.<sup>28</sup> Scholars were aware of the affinities of this midrash and pseudepigraphic literature, though the exact meaning of these affinities is far from clear.<sup>29</sup> However, it

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<sup>25</sup> According to the translation of Bell, see note 6.

<sup>26</sup> Y. Klugmann and sons, eds., *Commentary of R. Ephraim ben Shimshon and Early Ashkenaz Rabbis on the Torah* (Jerusalem: 2002), vol. 1, 152.

<sup>27</sup> A. Geula, “Lost Aggadic Works Known from Ashkenaz Only: Midrash Abkir, Midrash Esfa, and Devarim Zuta” [Hebrew] (PhD diss., Hebrew University, 2006), vol. 1, 113, 331–33. See also: Salomon Buber, *Liqutim from Midrash Abkir* (Vienna: G. Varag, 1883).

<sup>28</sup> Salomon Buber, *Midrash Aggadah on the Torah: Genesis – Exodus* (Vienna: A. Fante, 1894), 105.

<sup>29</sup> Martha Himmelfarb, *Between Temple and Torah* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 329–49, 351–58.

is evident that the compiler of that midrash had access to old traditions that are unknown elsewhere. 3) Sefer ha-Yashar is a kind of “retelling” of Genesis (mainly) in Biblical Hebrew that first appeared in Venice in 1625 and later became very popular for centuries (more than 40 editions and several translations).<sup>30</sup> The date and provenance of Sefer ha-Yashar is under dispute: L. Zunz thought it was written in Spain in the eleventh century, and J. Dan wrote that it was composed in sixteenth-century Italy, but I think—for reasons beyond the scope of the present discussion—it was written in the tenth or eleventh century in Italy. In any event, there is no doubt that the book was written centuries after the Qur’ān.

So now we have the trial episode in four versions, three of which share the common theme of the place the garment was torn: if in the front of Joseph’s garment, then he attacked her; but if the garment was torn from the back, then he was escaping, which means that she attacked him. In Sefer ha-Yashar the conditions are the opposite, which tells us that when the story was narrated, the transmitter erred by switching the conditions (especially likely when one does not understand the situation).<sup>31</sup> The two other Hebrew sources have embellishments that are not in the Qur’ān. In Midrash Aggada, the priests—that is, the judges—are mentioned (as in Sefer ha-Yashar). In Midrash Abkir Gabriel, the Angel is mentioned as the one who helped Joseph (similar to the role of this angel in the post-Qur’ānic episode of Joseph at the well), and one may wonder whether the Hebrew narrator enlarged his story or the Arabic narrator left out details that were considered irrelevant (as happened when he omitted the etrogim). As far as one can tell, in both Midrash Aggada and Midrash Abkir there is no hint that these sources were influenced by the Qur’ān, and therefore it is most likely that they were taken from a former Jewish source. Now the angel Gabriel is a well-known savior of Joseph in Jewish tradition.<sup>32</sup> He appears four times in Pseudo-Jonathan, and one of these cases is the Joseph narrative.<sup>33</sup> It is therefore

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<sup>30</sup> An English translation of this book: *The Book of Yashar*, trans. Mordecai Manuel Noah (New York, 1840; repr. New York, 1972). The episodes that are discussed here appear on pp. 135, 138, and 141–42.

<sup>31</sup> This happens when the narrative is transmitted orally as is attested several times with the terminology *hiluf ha-debarim* (= the other way around) in the Tannaitic literature, e.g. M. Shebiit 4:5; M. Gittin 5:5; T. Pesahim 3:8; and many more.

<sup>32</sup> BT Sotah 13b; Midrash Aggadah 3:15; 50:5.

<sup>33</sup> Ps. Jonathan Genesis 37:15; Exodus 24:10; Deuteronomy 32:9, 34:6. There are fourteen other occurrences in the Cairo Genizah Fragments, Tosefta Targums and Targum Writings.

assumed that the whole narrative—in the four sources—derived from an Aramaic Targum (probably a poem), similarly to the former episode that has been analyzed,<sup>34</sup> though it should be admitted that there is no compelling proof for that.

### The Wolf

While the episode of the women's feast with the etrogim is very famous, the trial episode is much less known, and the wolf episode is the least known in the narrative of Joseph and his brothers. The discussion below will focus on the wolf in the Qur'ān, its story tellers, and the parallels in Jewish sources.<sup>35</sup> We are about to enter a story within a story within another story.

In the biblical story, Joseph's brothers say that they will throw him into one of the pits and say that "a vicious beast has devoured him" (Gen 37:20). Later, Jacob sees Joseph's garment and assumes that Joseph had been devoured by a "bad animal" (Gen 37:33, according to the literal translation). In the Qur'ān, instead of the biblical "bad animal," the word "wolf" appears thrice, but there is nothing further. That is to say that instead of the biblical ambiguous "bad animal" (that appears also in Lev 26:6, Ezek 14:15, 34:25), the Qur'ān identifies the beast as a wolf. Now, before we continue with the wolf material, a methodological comment will be given.

The difference between a biblical "bad animal" and a later "wolf" (general vs. particular), is a well-known way of rabbinic interpretation. It was acknowledged by Itshak Heinemann as "the refuge from anonymity."<sup>36</sup> This phenomenon can be demonstrated by several cases. For example, Abraham's slave in Gen 24 is always identified by the Rabbis as Eliezer. This type of interpretation, from general to particular, is exemplified in another case when Satan appears before the Lord and speaks of Job on "one of the days" (Job 1:6), but the Rabbis took that day to be Rosh ha-Shana (that is: a day became The Day). Another example is that in the Torah it is

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<sup>34</sup> The illuminator of the Sarajevo Haggadah (p. 13), originally drawn possibly in Barcelona, depicted the scene of Joseph running from Potiphar's wife, and his garment is torn from the back. One may wonder what source stood before the eyes of the illuminator. It has already been stated that in this Haggadah the Joseph narrative is disproportionately prominent in 17 out of 69 illustrations (which resembles the case of this narrative in *Sefer ha-Yashar*). See Cecil Roth, *The Sarajevo Haggadah* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, [1963]), 37.

<sup>35</sup> Compare Witztum (see note 1 above), 433–34.

<sup>36</sup> I. Heinemann, *Darkei ha-Agada* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1950), 29–31.

stated that one should take “a nice-looking fruit” in Sukkot, and the Samaritans literally interpret this verse, until this very day, without trying to identify any certain fruit. However, the Rabbis understood this fruit to be an etrog; these examples show how the Rabbis tried to escape from ambiguity by making a definite identification of a specific word in the Torah.

Summing up this line of methodology, it is clear that when “a bad animal” is identified as a specific animal, a wolf, it seems to come from Jewish circles, although there is no rabbinic text where a “bad animal” is identified as a wolf.<sup>37</sup> Now, in *Sefer ha-Yashar*, which was composed centuries after the Qur’ān, not only does the wolf appear, but it also talks after being interrogated by Jacob as to whether he devoured Joseph. A similar story, though not fully identical, is known also from Islamic post-Qur’ānic sources where the wolf talks, claiming in apologetic words that he did not devour Joseph.<sup>38</sup> To be more precise: in the Qur’ān the wolf is only mentioned, but in Islamic post Qur’ānic traditions, as well as in *Sefer ha-Yashar*, the image of the wolf is much more elaborated, the wolf is an animated persona, and Jacob interrogates it.<sup>39</sup> It should be noted that this episode of the wolf being questioned by Jacob appears in Muslim art in a portrayal similar to that described about the wolf in the *Sefer ha-Yashar*.<sup>40</sup>

*Sefer ha-Yashar* was written later than the Qur’ān by three or more centuries, and it is quite a big book that contains many hundreds of stories. Most of them were identified as coming from Jewish sources, and some assumed sources have never been identified, but none of the stories comes from Arabic sources. However, the question still exists: did the author of *Sefer ha-Yashar* take this specific narrative of the speaking wolf from Islamic sources? That is to say, one has to assume that the

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<sup>37</sup> In m. Ta’anit 3:6 (B. Ta’anit 22b) there is a testimony concerning two wolves that devoured two children in Trans-Jordan.

<sup>38</sup> J. Meyuhas, *Yaldei Arab* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1928) (repr. 1970), vol. 1, 46–47. For an English translation, see Muhammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Kisā’i (Wheeler M. Thackston Jr., translator), *Tales of the Prophets (Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’)*, (Chicago: Great Books of the Islamic World, 1997), 168–70. On this story and storytellers in early Islam, see Shosh Ben-Ari, *Abraham – God’s Friend (Ḥalīl Allāh): Abraham’s Image in the Muslim Tradition* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2014), 141–46.

<sup>39</sup> The story is retold in R. Jacob Kuly, *Yalqut me ‘Am Lo ‘ez*, Genesis (Jerusalem: Or Hadash, 1968), vol. 2, 682.

<sup>40</sup> Na’ama Brosh, *Biblical Stories in Muslim Paint* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1991), 67.

developed narrative (the interrogation of the wolf) was available before the Qur'ān, though only the grain of the story remained in it (the wolf is only mentioned), but post- Qur'ānic Muslim sources preserved the “original” full narrative, and the author of Sefer ha-Yashar took the story from these comparatively late sources. Could this have happened, or did the author of Sefer ha-Yashar take the whole narrative directly from a lost Jewish tradition?

In the former two cases, the feast and the trial, it became clear that the author of Sefer ha-Yashar did not take his stories from the Qur'ān, and this observation is true here as well. Unfortunately, we do not have any pre-Qur'ānic source in which a wolf speaks. Now one of the greatest scholars of Jewish legends, Louis Ginzberg, stated the following: “This legend seems to be of Arabic origin, since in genuinely Jewish legends animals do not talk.”<sup>41</sup> However, it should be noted that this logic is highly questionable. The Jews are fully aware of a talking snake since the Garden of Eden, and of a talking ass since Balaam, so why would a talking wolf seem so strange to Ginzberg? As a matter of fact, Ginzberg himself wrote in his book—though several years later—about King Solomon talking to a wild cock, an ant, and to an eagle, and these animals spoke back. In Jewish tradition we have a text by the name *Pereq Shira* where all the animals, along with heavenly beings, praise the Lord by quoting biblical verses,<sup>42</sup> so there is no peculiarity in a talking wolf. Moreover, the change from an unidentified “bad animal” to a wolf is based on a rabbinic method of interpretation, and the feast story comes from Jewish circles as has already been discussed. There is something else in the discussion of the talking wolf that is known only from Sefer ha-Yashar. Sefer ha-Yashar itself is based on several former midrashim as well as on at least two Aramaic poems—the one that was discussed above and another that is beyond the scope of this discussion.<sup>43</sup> Now, among the Aramaic poems from the Genizah, one can see how the sea, the desert, the Jordan River, and additional objects (such as calendric months) were animated and thus became talking figures in these

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<sup>41</sup> Ginzberg, *Legends*, vol. 5, 332, n. 66.

<sup>42</sup> This text is known in several editions, yet there is no scientific one. See Isaac Seligman Baer, *Seder Avodat Israel* (Rödelheim: 1868) (repr. Tel Aviv 1957), 547–52.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Ginsburger, “Les Introductions Araméennes a la Lecture du Targum,” *REJ* 73 (1921): 14–26.

poems, appearing in dialogue and disputes.<sup>44</sup> This type of dramatization of the narrative while animating a figure is quite characteristic of these poems, so chances are that the talking wolf originated in such an Aramaic poem that later was known to (Jews who converted to be) Muslims on the one hand and to the author of Sefer ha-Yashar on the other hand.<sup>45</sup>

Right now we have three different versions of the wolf's narrative: the shortest and the oldest (available) is the one in the Qur'ān, while the more elaborated versions are post-Qur'ānic, one in Muslim circles and the other in Sefer ha-Yashar. Considering the whole three episodes and the "current" of transmission, it is now assumed that the origin of all three was an Aramaic poem like the one that tells of the women's feast, a poem that had been composed in the Land of Israel in the Byzantine era. In this poem the whole narrative of Joseph as well as the trial and the wolf were described. This assumed poem was the source of Sefer ha-Yashar on the one hand and the Muslim traditions on the other. As the poem was transmitted, the language was changed, either to Hebrew or Arabic, and some details were added while others were omitted. That is to say that just as other Jewish traditions penetrated Muslim circles through Jewish transmitters (such as Muhammad's comrades, some of whom converted to Islam), that was the fate of the wolf episode as well.

## Overview

Here I will share two observations that stemmed from the previous analysis, one that comes from the tradition and transmission school, and the other that comes from the school of religion.

### *1. Tradition and Transmission*

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<sup>44</sup> Sokoloff and Yahalom, *Jewish Aramaic Poetry from Late Antiquity*, 84–87, 238–40, 244–47; Robert Murray, "Aramaic and Syriac Dispute-Poems and Their Connections," in *Studia Aramaica*, eds. M.J. Geller, Jonas C. Greenfield, and M.P. Weitzman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 57–187.

<sup>45</sup> Witztum (see note 1 above) thought that Syriac poems influenced the Qur'an, while here it is demonstrated that the Qur'an was influenced by Aramaic poems that had been influenced by Syriac poems. In other words, what Witztum considered a direct link was actually an indirect link (by Jews and not by Christians). Witztum (p. 441) writes concerning lexical links as follows: "At most they might suggest an Aramaic/Syriac background rather than a Hebrew one," while he overlooked the Aramaic poems discussed here.

In the modern study of text criticism, philology has a major role concerning the understanding of an original text. It is not always easy to discern what in the textual variations is essential and what is just a mere embellishment (or a mistake). In our story we have different texts and traditions, so some words in these texts may be just a way to express the scene and have no importance by themselves, while other words are essential. In analogous terms, when we look at the many paintings of the feast of women depicted in the Muslim art tradition, it is not easy, even for the painter, to say what is essential and what is not. For example, in some of the paintings there are five women guests, while in other paintings the number of women is changed and has no merit by itself. That is to say, while one painter, according to a specific tradition, sought the number five as essential, the other painters did not pay attention to this detail.

The same problem appears when one looks at the different variants of the story from the point of view of the tradition and transmission school. Some thought that the citron/etrog is essential to the story, while others thought that substituting “fruit” or “bread” would make no difference. In all cases, the big picture is the same: women in an assembly calling on a lad to amuse them. However, in some cases the women are dressed in red, in other cases in green, and so on. The same is implied concerning the fruits, or the knives: what is essential to one storyteller is just an embellishment for the other. As has already been explained, the knives were added as a kind of explanation and thus became essential to the story, while—it is claimed—from the point of view of the original storyteller the knives are additions (and a sign of misunderstanding). On the other hand, in the Qur’ān there are no etrogim, since the tale-teller was not aware of the special character of etrogim. Just as in modern culture there are people who cannot say a joke without ruining it, so were there transmitters during the time when the story of Joseph was narrated orally who embellished their stories and thus ruined them without, of course, being aware of their deeds: etrogim or fruits, they are all the same. An expert in tradition needs to differentiate between essentials and embellishments, and one cannot rely on the transmitter, just as one cannot rely on even the best scribe.

One more word is needed concerning the role of the story. It should be noted that the role of the story in its transmission has changed over the ages. The biblical narrative took the story of Joseph and his brothers as part of the divine scheme of the way Israel went to be enslaved before they would be rescued by the Lord, according

to the vision Abraham the Patriarch had seen (Gen 15). In a way, the enslavement of Joseph was a “promo” to the ordeal and enslavement of all Israel, or in rabbinic terms: *Ma’aseh Abot Siman la-banim* (=the deeds of the ancestors indicate [or are a prototype for] their children’s). However, the Aramaic Targum that tells the story of Joseph was not originally versed, or chanted, in Genesis, but rather while reading the Decalogue. Now Joseph became the pious man who could restrain himself from a married woman and thus became a paradigm for all pious men. That is to say, the transmission of the oral story marked a change in the story’s role in religion. One should not forget that we talk here about three languages and two religions over the course of several centuries; this is how a story “goes” from one culture to another, from oral to written and from written to oral traditions as complementary media.

## ***2. What is sacred in a sacred story?***

I would like to end this paper with a final comment concerning ancient and modern sacred stories and the difference between them. In modern culture, sacred stories, in a broad generalization, tend to be stories about a sacred man, a sacred time (=an event, a miracle), or a sacred place. However, the ancient sacred stories that we analyzed above are quite different. The story about women amusing themselves with a sex-toy and an aphrodisiac is not far from a modern newspaper story of an almost-rape with all the details of the exact positions of both the male and the female during the occasion. In other words, the story before us, according to the explanation given concerning its original meaning, looks like a story that might have appeared in *Playgirl* magazine more than like a story praising the Lord, or any other sacred story that people would use to educate their children.

The episode about a talking wolf looks like it is either taken from one of the Aesopian cycle stories or from Pinocchio. Its biblical counterparts, the talking snake and the Balaam’s she-ass, play a religious role, one way or another, and one should be aware of the fact that in the Talmudic literature there are dozens of Aesopian stories.<sup>46</sup> However, the talking wolf serves the narrator’s desire to talk and promote the story

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<sup>46</sup> The bibliography on Talmudic Aesopian stories is vast; see D. Daube, *Ancient Hebrew Fables* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973); H. Schwarzbaum, “Talmudic-Midrashic Affinities of Some Aesopic Fables,” in *Jewish Folklore between East and West: Collected Papers*, ed. E. Yassif, (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 1989), 197–214 [= *Laographia* 22 (1965), 466–83; = Henry A. Fischel, ed., *Essays in Greco-Roman and Related Talmudic Literature* (New York: Ktav, 1977), 425–42.

more than to glorify the Lord, since the whole episode of the wolf does nothing but embellish the original story. In other words, the three episodes just analyzed in Sūrat Yūsuf reveal the difference between ancient and modern sacred stories. Pornography is not only a matter of geography; it is also a cultural theme that depends upon and changes in time. All in all, this difference in sacred stories' narrative might tell us about the difference between ancient religion and its modern manifestation, but here we enter into a new story.

### **Conclusion**

This is a story about an old “successful” story that was adopted by a newer culture. The story was so successful that it was told over and over, again and again for the sake of storytelling and became longwinded. The basic story is about a righteous hero who obeyed the divine law and went to jail for his piety but later became the viceroy. In other words, this is a male Cinderella type of story with a religious depth: piety pays, the Lord will help the pious. However, during the process of retelling the story it was embellished repeatedly either by adding or omitting “details” in the narrative or by connecting the story to other stories or telling it in other than its “original” time. The rewritten Bible is a post-Biblical phenomenon and has not stopped until this very day.

In the Qur'ān Sūrat Yūsuf, three episodes have been analyzed in order to trace their origin. It has been found that the episode of the women's feast in the Qur'ān is based on Jewish sources, not only because the Jewish source predates the Qur'ān by several centuries, but also because two of the narrative's ingredients have parallels only in Jewish sources. The conditions in the trial episode that appear in the Qur'ān have been found in Jewish sources that do not show any influence of Islam. The wolf narrative appears in the Qur'ān briefly, but in Sefer ha-Yashar the entire narrative is much more elaborated, and it is assumed that this episode, as the former episodes, were taken from Jewish Aramaic poems that used to be chanted by Jews in their synagogues in antiquity (and in Arab lands as well).

If one is allowed to make a generalization from this discussion, it may be said that the Jews who lived in Arabia in the seventh century used Aramaic in their liturgy that had its origin in the land of Israel. And these Jews were to some degree rabbinic, but

they had traditions that are not attested in the Talmud. Hopefully, more studies of the relations between Jewish and Muslim sources will clarify this hypothesis.

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