

# Typological Figuration and the Meaning of “Spiritual”: The Qur’anic Story of Joseph

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## INTRODUCTION

The Qur’an is not without a center of narrative gravity despite its notoriously challenging narrative flow. This becomes especially apparent when we are being told about the experience of particular prophets or messengers with their proper community. History and the rise and fall of civilizations and cultures are punctuated by the appearance of these special envoys, according to the Qur’an—thus their epic struggles in the divinely inspired effort to guide humans from ignorance to enlightenment and from savagery to civilization in whatever community they have existed (prophets have been sent to all of them, according to Q 16:36). However, such narrative continuity is frequently difficult to detect “on the page.” In these instances, certain characteristic Qur’anic literary features maintain the integrity and coherence of the whole in the absence of explicit and continuous, unbroken narrative dramatic movement.

The following is an attempt to discuss, in sequence, (1) typological figuration as it pertains to (2) the story of Joseph, concluding with a focus on one of the main “characters” in the story, namely, the famous shirt (*qamīṣ*), which functions as a touchstone of narrative continuity and as a symbol of Joseph’s spiritual journey and travails. This exploration starts from a premise that the Qur’an and *tafsīr* are both literature. Typological figuration, a venerable and powerful literary device, is in both instances one of the central keys to an otherwise sometimes opaque Qur’anic narrative continuity. In this article it will be seen that typological figuration functions beyond the confines of “mere” literature to inform Islamic piety and religious thought.<sup>1</sup>

## I. TYPOLOGICAL FIGURATION

While typological figuration has long been recognized as an important and persuasive literary feature of the Bible and even its exegesis, the Qur’an and the vast literary web that it generated have not yet been subject to the same kind of thorough examination we find, for example, in Leonhard Goppelt’s classic study. There it was demonstrated beyond any possible doubt that the authors of the New Testament saw in the life and teachings of Jesus a typological fulfillment (*cum* repetition) of a variety of distinctive themes and motifs and “promises” of the Old Testament. The New Testament is, through typological exegesis, a

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1. This is in line with Frye’s observation (1990: xv) that the Bible is “a work of literature plus.”

*tafsir* of the Hebrew Bible and the mission of Jesus is perfectly and seamlessly identified (at least for the authors and their readers) with what has come before. As a result, there is no doubt about the identity of such Old Testament types as “the Lamb of God” or “the Suffering Servant.” Even the experience of Jonah in the belly of the whale is seen as a prefiguration of the mission and role of Jesus, especially his period in the tomb before the resurrection.<sup>2</sup>

Typological figuration is, of course, found frequently in many other contexts outside the strictly religious. Since Goppelt’s foundational work on the power and prevalence of typological figuration at work in the New Testament, we have grown accustomed to recognizing this literary figure and its persuasive rhetorical and poetic efficacy in various settings. It represents history in a series of conceptual, as distinct from verbal, rhymes. Often we see it at work in studies of history and historiography, ancient, modern, and contemporary. In the “logic” (which transcends logic) of typology, Augustus can be both Aeneas and Romulus redivivus at the same time. It has been suggested that our own confidence in the process of—and one might add the structure we give to—history is probably derived, whether wittingly or unwittingly, from the compelling symmetry and meaning that typological figuration delivers.<sup>3</sup>

Typology says that the old world has ended, a new one is about to be born. Those who perceive this shift and are sympathetic to it, such as the early followers of the Prophet Muḥammad, will be persecuted and ostracized for merely “understanding.” The understanding is that Muḥammad represents the new return of the life-giving, divine, ancient and eternal, prophetic spirit. Therefore, this new and numerically insignificant community depends upon the revelation for encouragement, solace, and promise that “it will all work out” despite the serious hardships and obstacles it will undoubtedly be its fate to encounter and suffer. (Paradise, for example, is typically described in the Qur’an when the Hour or the Last Day is mentioned.)<sup>4</sup> Typology is a figure that unites time, harmonizes it, and gathers it together: “the type exists in the past and the antitype in the present, or the type exists in the present and the antitype in the future.”<sup>5</sup> This reflects a basic attitude toward the world and one’s place in it with regard to the passing of time. What was formally mere time past is now, as a result of the prophetic imagination, History. So it assumes heretofore-unimagined importance and, at the same time, the mystery of this great secret/importance is revealed.<sup>6</sup> The past is now seen as part of a process through which “meaning” may be identified with human experience. Interpreting Shi’i theological philosophy on the problem of time and history, Henry Corbin’s well-known observation is impossible to ignore: “Our thinkers perceive the world not as ‘evolving’ in a horizontal and rectilinear direction, but as ascending: the past is not behind us

2. Goppelt 1982. For Lamb of God, Suffering Servant, and Jonah as typological prefigurations of Jesus as antitype, see pp. 189 and 72–73, respectively. See also Goppelt’s near contemporary: Auerbach 1984. On repetition, see Kierkegaard 2009.

For a good example of how the “typological perspective” has permeated Western art and culture, note the numerous interlocking typological pairs depicted in the Sistine Chapel, both around the walls and on the ceiling. The walls present a parallel history of the “epic of the Hebrews” compared with the history of Jesus and his followers. The ceiling, to cite just one example, portrays Jonah with the fish beside him turned towards God, as a prefiguration of the resurrection, symbol of the New Covenant that takes the place of the Old Covenant.

3. Funkenstein 1993: 74–87.

4. “In the Qur’an, descriptions of the hereafter appear in relation to the arrival of a day, ‘the hour’ (*al-sā‘a*), ‘reckoning day’ (*yawm al-ḥisāb*), ‘the day of judgment’ (*yawm al-dīn*), ‘the last day’ (*al-yawm al-ākhir*), or ‘the day of resurrection’ (*yawm al-qiyāma*). . . .” Kinbergh 2004: 12a. See also Lawson forthcoming a.

5. Frye 1982: 80.

6. Frye 1969: 272.

but ‘beneath our feet’.<sup>7</sup> Such a statement actually may go to the heart of a general Islamic view of time and history, and thus has implications far beyond an understanding of Corbin’s basic sources, as in this statement from the *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*:

The entire world in all its variety was created by the one creator at one particular moment. It follows that oneness was the ideal state for it at all times and that to which it should always aspire. As the beginning was one, so the expected end of the world is one for everyone and everything. Whatever is and takes place in between these two definite points of created time, no matter how varied in detail, follows a set overall pattern. Thus the history of the past and of the future, including that of the present, is fundamentally uniform. No distinction between the three modes of time need be made by the observer of human history.<sup>8</sup>

This may be akin to what al-Qurṭubī was referring to when he characterized the Night of Power as the point where all time meets, *jamiʿ al-dahr*. Michael Sells has spoken eloquently in this same connection about what one might call a “sacrament of time and history” or perhaps better an “icon of time and history” and its centrality for Islamic religion in his classic article on the Night of Power:<sup>9</sup>

The Christian mystics, John the Scot Erigena and Meister Eckhart, both emphasized the combination of perfect and imperfect tenses as essential to an intimation of the “eternal moment,” the moment that for Eckhart always has occurred and always is occurring, and which in his Christian interpretation corresponds to the eternal birth of the son of God in the soul. . . . (p. 249 n. 27)

Through such aural, syntactic, and thematic inter-twining among the *rūḥ* passages involving creation, revelation, and *yawm ad-dīn*, of which the above example is only one of many that could be cited, the spirit takes on a temporal multivalence. The occurrence of the term *rūḥ* within these three distinct moments engenders an intertextual acoustical-semantic dynamic that plays against the separation of the three moments and transforms normal understandings of time. (p. 254)

The connection between *rūḥ* and *qadr* in *sūrat al-qadr* suggests that this transformation of time into a primordial unity is an aspect of *qadr*. . . . Translators of the Qurʾān have tended to choose terms like “power” for *qadr*, terms that express only one side of the semantic field. It is my view that “destiny” might come closer to expressing the multivalence of the term, though no single English term would seem sufficient. (p. 255)

The classical interpreters emphasize the storing up of future events in the *laylat al-qadr*, a phenomenon that represents the containment of a span of time (whether one year or all time) within a single moment. (p. 256)

Even if all of the details of this new “meaning” are not completely clear now, they will be made clear in due course. When this happens, the present magically becomes the antitype or repetition of previous history but with the added luminosity of truth revealed, and fulfilled:

7. Corbin 1993: 5.

8. Rosenthal 2002: 430. Frye (1969: 247) shares the apposite rhetorical musing:

It would perhaps be difficult to prove completely the axiom that objects do not cease to exist when we have stopped looking at them. Yet it is hard to see how we could maintain a consistent sense of reality without assuming it, and everyone does so assume it in practice and would even assert it as the first article of common sense. For some reason it is more difficult to understand that events do not necessarily cease to exist when we have stopped experiencing them, and those who would assert, as an equally obvious fact, that all things do not dissolve in time any more than they do in space are very rare.

Compare William Faulkner’s now even more famous line in *Requiem for a Nun*: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” Thus an otherwise “spiritual” perspective seems central, at least in the mind of Faulkner, to the making of what we call “art.”

9. Sells 1991.

the code cracked.<sup>10</sup> We now understand, and a mystery we may not even have recognized as existing previously is now solved. Such understanding may also acquire the features of revolution, as when the past is simply obliterated and rendered no longer pertinent. Northrup Frye uses the image of waking from sleep:

When we wake up from sleep, one world is simply abolished and replaced by another. This suggests a clue to the origin of typology: it is essentially a revolutionary form of thought and rhetoric. We have revolutionary thought whenever the feeling “life is a dream” becomes geared to an impulse to waken from it.<sup>11</sup>

The prominence of typology in the Qurʾan and *tafsīr* as a hermeneutic presupposition or strategy suggests an association of this literary conceit with what has so aptly been described as the “apocalyptic imagination.”<sup>12</sup> It is important to observe that not only does typology move through time and transcend time (Frye’s words), but, in fact, typology frequently erases or collapses time. It does this by insisting that in the presence of God all things are somehow happening at once.<sup>13</sup> Time is that which “sorts them out” for human consumption. It is the obliteration of time—perhaps centripetally analogous with the splitting of the atom—that would seem to summon up the powerful literary energies and concerns of bona fide revelation and focus them into an apocalypse.

The constant occurrence of the pervasive figure of typology throughout the Qurʾan provides one bank, if you like, for the narrative stream flowing through the Qurʾan from “beginning” to “end.”<sup>14</sup> The overall structure is much the same as that described in sura Yūsuf some years ago: circular<sup>15</sup> and chiasmic.<sup>16</sup> The Qurʾan has no beginning and no end, although it contains within its sphere numerous discrete narratives, each with their own beginnings, middles, and ends, whether explicit or implicit.

Note that typological figuration applies to both the prophets and their communities. The first Muslims compared—and in some sense identified—themselves with the ordeals experienced by the Children of Israel and the followers or *qawm* of all other prophets. And, in the nature of things, this was as it should be. To quote from a scholar of Jewish apocalyptic:

In the pressing need to define spiritual identity in the face of challenge, and to sustain hope, a basic perspective is nevertheless identifiable around which apocalyptic systems grow: it is the perspective of apocalyptic eschatology which furnishes a way of viewing reality which denies the apparent superior position of opposing groups of any validity vis-à-vis divine purpose.<sup>17</sup>

The typological iteration or rendering of Muḥammad’s prophethood points to the erasure of time and history in a persuasive and compelling gesture of the prophetic imagination. All time is dissolved or redissolved into the original moment characterized by the Qurʾan as the day of the covenant (Q 7:172), a time outside of time in a place beyond place that may indeed

10. Frye 1982: 80–81.

11. *Ibid.*, 82–83.

12. As in the title of the book by John Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination* (1989).

13. Such a radical mode of reading has been identified by Auerbach (1984: 42) vis-à-vis Augustine:

Even though Augustine rejects abstract allegorical spiritualism and develops his whole interpretation of the Old Testament from the concrete historical reality, he nevertheless has an idealism which removes the concrete event, completely preserved as it is, from time and transposes it into the perspective of eternity.

14. The other is the constant interplay of duality, symmetry, and opposition, viz. Qurʾanic enantiodromia. See Lawson 2008.

15. Waldman 1986: 55.

16. Mir 1986.

17. Hanson 1979: 433.

be seen as a symbol or metaphor for what has recently come to be discussed in other, more scientific settings as the birth of consciousness.<sup>18</sup> The apocalyptic secret is revealed: The chaos of mutually exclusive, historical religions is now transformed into a harmony of periodic divine revelation, the reading of which is made possible by the newly proclaimed (yet simultaneously ancient, viz., *badīʿ*)<sup>19</sup> alphabet of prophets and divine messengers who are shown to be profoundly related and of one purpose. This new alphabet forms the language for the proper reading of the past. The nightmare of history is dealt with by demonstrating exactly how illusory and ephemeral “history as time” is. It is awareness, consciousness, understanding, and their like that are, by comparison, substantial and permanent (though atemporal and supraspatial) and therefore superior to (as in *ṣāhib* ‘owner, master of’) history. This is one reason why it may be possible to translate *islām* as ‘enlightenment’. Obviously, this is not a literal translation. However, based on the philology of Ignaz Goldziher and Toshihiko Izutsu, it is arguable that the true opposite of *jahl* ‘ignorance, savagery’ is not *ʿilm* ‘knowledge’ but rather *ḥilm* ‘moderation, patience, civility’ for which Islam, especially in its adjectival form *islāmī* and used in diametrical opposition to *jāhili* and its permutations, may be seen as a near synonym.<sup>20</sup> “The *ḥalīm* is the civilized man’, as opposed to the *djāhil*, the ‘barbarian’.”<sup>21</sup>

Based on comparison and contrast between two principles, typological figuration—ultimately dependent upon symmetry and duality so clearly and unambiguously at work in the Qurʾan—may be thought to articulate in a special and distinct way the characteristic apocalyptic élan of the Qurʾan by standing for that great secret that the Prophet Muḥammad and the Qurʾan unveiled to the chaos of religions that confronted him and that he himself confronted on behalf of God. The secret is none other than the interconnectedness and kinship of all prophetic messages, their prophets, and their followers.<sup>22</sup> This is what is called in the Islamic tradition “spiritual truth” or “reality.” The shirt of Joseph (about which more below) is a perfect emblem or symbol of this spiritual truth.

Another key characteristic of typological figuration is that it is generative. Once the basic pattern is introduced, it becomes a matter of the natural, fluent, and unstoppable “logic of

18. See Lawson 2008: 39–40 and Lawson 2010. Note the implication such movement or “return to the beginning” has for the power of the Joseph myth to gather the heretofore scattered energies and resources of “Israel.” In such a way does the Qurʾan’s Joseph have implications for consolidation and individuation on both the communal, societal level and the individual, existential level. Frye’s discussion of the myth of *sparagmos* may be suggestive here (1969, esp. 394–97 and 287; see also 289, 403). On the distinctive and characteristic understanding of history in the Qurʾan, see Neuwirth 2008; Rosenthal 2002. See now also the recent discussion by Stewart 2010.

19. *Badīʿ* means, in a passive sense, “innovated, discovered,” but because it also evokes God the Originator/Innovator par excellence—one of the so-called ninety-nine names (see Q 2:117; 6:101) it denotes ancientness, timelessness, and pre-eternity. The rhetorical and literary *coincidentia oppositorum* in this word is possibly one reason the virtuoso ‘Abbāsīd poets used the term to describe—and not in a self-effacing way—their own poetry. Consult, for example, Khalafallah 1960.

Again, Auerbach’s (1984: 58) observations are apposite:

These two comparisons, with allegory on the one hand and with the symbolical, mythical forms on the other, disclose figural prophecy in a twofold light: youthful and newborn as a purposive, creative, concrete interpretation of universal history; infinitely old as the late interpretation of a venerable text, charged with history, that had grown for hundreds of years.

20. Lawson 2010: 190–91.

21. Pellat 1971, partly quoting Goldziher 1888–90, 1: 319ff.

22. The juxtaposition of the duality of experience and the universality of truth is a major preoccupation of the complex and singular polymath, Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahraṣṭānī (d. 548/1153) in his Qurʾan commentary, *Mafāṭih al-asrār*, recently beautifully explicated and analyzed in Toby Mayer 2009: 25–35.

the imagination”<sup>23</sup> to apply it to a number of different contexts and subjects. Thus we see typological iterations of the Prophet Muḥammad in the characterizations of such subsequent figures of religious authority (viz., *walāya*, *khilāfa*, *imāma*) as the first four caliphs (and, in a sense, all subsequent caliphs), the imams of the Shi‘a, the great imams of the legal tradition and religious culture (cf., e.g., al-Shāfi‘ī’s *Risāla* for the distinctive image of the Prophet Muḥammad that inhabits that work), and last but certainly not least, the sufi sheikh, who may be considered a holographic or “virtual” reiteration (viz., *maḥzar*) of prophetic authority. Thus typological figuration together with other similarly ubiquitous and characteristic literary structures of the text is clearly communicated—both in meaning and form—to a vast readership and audience far beyond Arabic linguistic boundaries.<sup>24</sup>

## II. THE STORY OF JOSEPH IN THE QUR’AN AND EXEGESIS

With such a clear, consistent, and paradigmatic basic message, it is perhaps in the nature of what might be termed “anti-narratological relief” that the Qur’an itself is far from presenting a unitary discrete narrative, from its “beginning” to its “end.”<sup>25</sup> The only sura of the Qur’an universally recognized to have a “proper” beginning, middle, and end is the sura of Joseph (Q 12).<sup>26</sup> Thus it is possible that the main protagonist of the sura, as a paragon of beauty, is also a paragon of order and meaning and typological figuration, which has its own inherent beauty or aesthetic.<sup>27</sup> For our purposes here I would only point out that the conclusion of this sura emphasizes the happy reunion of Joseph with his people and most significantly with his father, Jacob. In the course of telling the story of Joseph and the relationship implied for the current audience, Muḥammad himself is seen, by virtue of his spiritual/typological kinship with all of the prophets and messengers, as being reunited with his true family, who in the very act of reunion/recognition (cf. *‘irfān*, *ma‘rifā*) are given a new measure of divine guidance, another revelation.<sup>28</sup> Such a reading would seem to be in line with the distinctively Qur’anic formal and stylistic identity between history’s movement (type/antitype) and the pervasive Qur’anic motif of “pairing” (*zawj/tazawwuj*).<sup>29</sup> Typologi-

23. Neuwirth 1984: 454 [12].

24. This calls to mind Umberto Eco’s (1994: 508) widely quoted comment: “I would define the poetic effect as the capacity that a text displays for continuing to generate different readings, without ever being completely consumed.”

25. This is a question that arises from viewing the text from a particular perspective. Viewed from another angle, there is neither beginning nor end.

26. This very feature was one of the reasons it was rejected as being an authentic part of the Qur’an by a faction of the Khārijites, according to al-Shahrastānī. The ‘Ajārida, the followers of ‘Abd al-Karīm b. ‘Ajrad, and especially, it seems, the subgroup of the ‘Ajārida called the Maymūniyya (followers of Maymūn al-Qaddāh), rejected the sura of Joseph on the grounds precisely that it was a complete, consistent narrative (“a [mere] story”) and a love-story at that.

27. A question awaiting a satisfactory answer is just how it came to be that most of the other clear and characteristic attributes of the Qur’anic Joseph seem to dissolve into insignificance in the presence of his beauty. The picture presented by the Qur’an is one of a very powerful, independent, and pious mind capable of controlling an entire society. Yet it is beauty that emerges as the most important of his many qualities, according to the tradition. This is the case with many of the Qur’anic prophets: one key trait, at the expense of many others, becomes identified with this or that specific prophetic figure. See Tottoli 2002.

28. It has been observed (Waldman 1986) that Muḥammad can serve, simultaneously, as the antitype for both Joseph and Jacob. See the very suggestive comments by Frye (1969: 196), whose study of apocalypse and epic has much relevance for the study of the Qur’an. I am not addressing here the many ways in which Joseph functions as a type for Jesus, the antitype.

29. Zwettler 1990. For a more thorough engagement with and assessment of the late Michael Zwettler’s seminal ideas and their relationship to developing a notion of “the spiritual,” see Lawson 2008.

cal figuration expresses a longed-for consolidation of scattered, exiled, dissipated forces, in the life both of the individual and of society.<sup>30</sup>

On the model of the New Testament (the New Covenant) as a commentary on the Hebrew Bible (the Old Covenant), the Qurʾan is a commentary on earlier scriptures, their traditions, and their faith communities. Through the typological identification of the Prophet Muḥammad with all previous prophets (both known and unknown), the Qurʾan may be thought to decode the great baffling and terrifying “nightmare of history” and its chaos of religions—and point a way out.<sup>31</sup> It reveals or perhaps more accurately, lifts the veil (Ar. *kashf* = Grk. *apokalypsis*) covering the true nature of the relationship between historical reality, spiritual reality, and social reality. Most importantly, of course, it makes clear and nonnegotiable the relationship between God and the world through prophethood and messengership without which there would be no understanding or meaning. And inasmuch as the heart of this revelation or apocalypse is articulated in the “return” of the prophetic reality to his people (as, for example, the type of the reunion of Joseph with his tribe), then it may be thought an apocalypse of union or reunion and recognition.<sup>32</sup>

The story of Joseph in the Qurʾan is among the favorites of Muslims in general. It is considered the “best of stories” (Q 12:3), because it is a more or less extended and consistent narrative, unlike other suras of the Qurʾan.<sup>33</sup> According to al-Thaʿlabī (d. 428/1036), the author of a *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, the story of Joseph is the most beautiful “because of the lesson concealed in it, on account of Yūsuf’s generosity and its wealth of matter, in which prophets, angels, devils, jinn, men, animals, birds, rulers, and subjects play a part.”<sup>34</sup>

The contents of the sura present something of an integrated expression of the fundamental thrust of Islam, whether from the point of view of personal religiosity and spirituality, or from the broader perspective of humanity’s communal religious life. As with many suras of the Qurʾan, this one also emphasizes the connection of Islam with previous religions. The number of verses in sura 12 approximates the number of suras in the Qurʾan itself.<sup>35</sup> And the sura of Joseph has been singled out<sup>36</sup> by various exegetes throughout *tafsīr* history as one that lends itself to discussion, because, unlike many other suras of the Qurʾan, it presents a comparatively sustained narrative. At the same time, like other suras, it is replete with many topics considered to be key to the Islamic religion in general and the authority, role, and vocation of prophethood in particular. Thus this sura is seen as bringing together all of the various concerns, themes, and otherwise perhaps disparate aspects of the Qurʾanic vision under one roof, in one place. (Or, in line with the central metaphor informing the word “text,” it may be seen as weaving together in one “tapestry” those elements so distinctive

30. It is a puzzle why Eliade in *Myth of the Eternal Return* (1971) did not pay more attention to Islam.

31. The formulation “chaos of religions” was first coined and elaborated in Lawson 2010: 189–91, on the pattern of other parallel English plural formulae, such as “a pride of lions” or “an exaltation of larks.” It is meant to suggest the social and religious disarray obtaining at the rise of Islam portrayed in the traditional Islamic histories. A timely, related reading of the same history is in Donner 2010.

32. Note the role of Tahep in Samaritan theology, a theology in which Joseph has a prominent role. Macdonald 1964: 332–44.

33. Pace Wansbrough who analyzes the commentary on sura 12 of Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 148/765). Wansbrough (1977: 131) maintains that, notwithstanding the claim of narrative consistency by *mufasssīrūn*, the story of Joseph is “elliptic, often unintelligible without exegetical complement.”

34. Brinner 2002: 646. See now Brinner and Thackston for translations of al-Thaʿlabī and al-Kisāʾī.

35. According to the usual numbering of verses, sura 21 has 112 verses, while suras 17 and 12 both have 111 verses. No sura has 114 verses, the number that corresponds exactly to the total number of suras in the Qurʾan.

36. By devoting discrete works of exegesis to this sura alone. See the following.

to the Qur'an.) The same is said of *sūrat al-baqara*,<sup>37</sup> but the difference between the two is clear. With regard to uniting the message of the Qur'an in one compelling and entertaining narrative, the frankly operatic sura of Joseph "outstrips" *sūrat al-baqara* by many leagues.

The figure of Joseph as a spiritual hero and prophet has also been the subject of several works. For example, Ibn al-ʿArabī took up the Qur'anic Joseph in his *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* as a basis for his discussion of the spiritual imagination and the role of interpretation or "proper understanding" (*taʿwīl*) of the signs of God, because this topic is also central to the unfolding of the Qur'anic story.<sup>38</sup> The sura has also been the subject of commentaries and elaborations. To Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) is ascribed a mystical *tafsīr* on this sura.<sup>39</sup> The same work has been ascribed to Abū Ḥāmid's younger brother Aḥmad (d. 520/1126) and is published as *Aḥsan al-qaṣaṣ*.<sup>40</sup> Other titles for this work are *al-Durra al-bayḍa* and *Baḥr al-maḥabba wa-asrār al-mawadda fī tafsīr sūrat Yūsuf*. The latter title was apparently published in Bombay in 1894. Verifying the precise authorship of this "Ghazālian" work remains to be done. Another example of the interest in the sura is the eighteenth-century *Natījat al-tafsīr fī sūrat Yūsuf* by one Shaykh Yaʿqūb b. Shaykh Muṣṭafā al-Khalwatī, completed in the year 1133/1720. This work collects excerpts from commentaries by a variety of authors including al-Māturīdī, al-Nasafī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, al-Qurṭubī, al-Qushayrī, al-Ṭūsī, al-Zamakhsharī, and the "books of preachers."<sup>41</sup> In addition to these commentaries, *GAL* lists several others with some duplication.<sup>42</sup> A *Tafsīr sūrat Yūsuf* is ascribed to Mullā Ṣadrā, although the catalogue cited lists only a *Tafsīr sūrat Yā Sīn* for this author.<sup>43</sup> There is mention of another work with the title *Aḥsan al-qaṣaṣ*, this time by *tāj al-ʿulamāʾ* al-Naqavī, grandson of the famous Dildār Naṣīrābādī (d. 1236/1820), who studied in Mashhad and Karbalāʾ,<sup>44</sup> and who was apparently "the first Indian to return to India as a recognised mujtahid, having studied under Bihbahānī in Karbalā. He was instrumental in establishing the Uṣūlī school in Oudh and also for a campaign against Sufism."<sup>45</sup> This work was published in ʿAzīmābād, presumably sometime before 1894, the year of the author's death. Another *Tafsīr sūrat Yūsuf* is ascribed to one Aḥmad b. Asad b. Iṣḥāq, about whom no other details are given.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to studies in Arabic and other Islamic languages, the sura of Joseph has also attracted attention from "Western scholarship"; as of this writing there are a few monographs available on the Qur'anic Joseph story.<sup>47</sup> Those who have studied the sura have approached it

37. Reda El-Tahry 2010 analyses and critiques the existing scholarship and offers a new approach.

38. Ibn al-ʿArabī 1966, 1: 99–106. See also Ibn al-ʿArabī 1980: 119–27. For the importance of the figure of Yūsuf and his ordeal with Potiphar's wife in early Sufi *tafsīr*, see Böwering 1980: 256.

39. Al-Ghazālī 1895.

40. Delhi 1900. See *GAL* S I: 747 for a list of several manuscripts of this work with the name *Sirr al-ʿālamayn fī tafsīr sūrat Yūsuf*.

41. *GAL* mentions this work in several places. Twice Brockelmann gives the name of the author as al-Khalwatī (*GAL* II: 440 and S II: 653), and once as "Yaʿqūb ʿAfawī vom Orden der Ḡalwatīya" (S II: 663). In all three places, the work listed (printed in Istanbul, 1266 [1849]) and the author's death date (1149/1736) are the same.

42. See *GAL* II: 204, 437; S II: 135.

43. *GAL* S II: 589. The catalogue in question is *Fihrist kitābkhāna-yi madrasa-yi Sipahsālār*, 1: 128. *Dharīʿa* appears to be the source of this error in *GAL*, see below.

44. *GAL* S II: 853.

45. Momen 1985: 145.

46. *GAL* S II: 984.

47. De Prémare 1989; Goldman 1995; Fatoohi 2007; Kugel 1990 (and the translation into English of Bajouda 1992). See also several references in later works by Annemarie Schimmel to a monograph in progress entitled *The Shirt of Joseph* (Schimmel 1999: 45 n. 1; Schimmel 1994: 109 n. 5). As far as I know, it was never completed.



from a variety of angles. Biblical and Qurʾanic comparison is probably the best represented.<sup>48</sup> However, there are discussions of its exegesis,<sup>49</sup> dramaturgical “subtext,”<sup>50</sup> its general literary features,<sup>51</sup> the symbolism (of the cloak, e.g.<sup>52</sup>), the portrayal of love,<sup>53</sup> ambiguity, betrayal, reunion, filial piety, and cosmology<sup>54</sup>—in short, “all things (*Kullu-Shayʾ*).”<sup>55</sup>

An indication of the importance that the story of Joseph has had for the Shiʿa is the many titles of *tafāsīr* devoted solely to it in *Dharīʿa*, a multi-volume bibliographic survey of Twelver Shiʿism. Volume one lists three separate works, two of which were written in the nineteenth century.<sup>56</sup> Volume four lists ten separate entries, one of which is the previously mentioned work of *tāj al-ʿulamāʾ*.<sup>57</sup> The first entry (no. 1512) is the above-mentioned work by Mullā Ṣadrā. The first line of the work, which al-Ṭīhrānī quotes, is the same as that said to begin the *Tafsīr sūrat Yā Sin* [Q 36] in the Sipahsālār catalogue quoted by *GAL*. The ninth entry is ascribed to yet another descendant of Dildār, one Muḥammad b. al-Sayyid Dildār ʿAlī Naqavī al-Naṣīrābādī al-Lakhnawī (d. 1326/1908). Given the well-attested antipathy of the Uṣūliyya toward the Shaykhīs, and by extension the Bābīs, it is most interesting that the descendants of the great Indian Uṣūlī scholar felt called upon to compose commentaries on the sura of Joseph, perhaps as a corrective to the by then well-known, or at least infamous, imitation of the Qurʾan by the Bāb. The Bābī enormity may have also been behind the decision to publish (in 1266/1849) the above-mentioned *Natīja* by al-Khalwatī.

The sura of Joseph has particular meaning for Shiʿism. In addition to the distinct relevance of the motif of hiddenness, pointed out some years ago by Abbas Amanat, the sura may be thought especially relevant to and reflective of the syntax and morphology of the grammar of Shiʿi piety in a number of other instances.<sup>58</sup> Not least among such resonances is the role played by the perfect transformation of time into history, a history in which betrayal and injustice are changed for faithfulness and justice. The symmetry of the narrative is the first signal of this. As already mentioned, this sura is prized by the greater Muslim tradition as the shining example of Qurʾanic narrative perfection. Unlike all of the other 113 Qurʾanic suras, this one is structured by the three sine qua non elements of both myth and story as such: a beginning, a middle, and an end. Thus, on the one hand, it may be thought most artificial (as in literary artifice) and, on the other, a most accurate reflection of the Islamic religious ethos, which includes the proper ending of the story of humanity with the Day of Judgment. Its special attraction for Shiʿism comes into play in the drama of the envy, jealousy, betrayal, and lies of Joseph’s brothers.<sup>59</sup> In addition, the theme of patience (*ṣabr*, *ṣabr jamīl*) is personified in Jacob and is especially pertinent to the religious idea of “waiting [viz.,

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Of course, Joseph is tremendously important to the Christian tradition as well, as is evidenced, inter alia, by Thomas Mann’s self-described masterwork, *Josef und seine Brüder*, composed in four separate substantial books between the years 1926 and 1943. His artistic rendering has recently become the focus of such scholars as Assman 2006 and Bal 2008. Of interest also is McGaha 1997.

48. Macdonald 1956a and b; Waldman 1986; Abdel Haleem 1990; Bernstein 2006.

49. Beeston 1963; Keeler 2006, esp. 278–309.

50. Johns 1981; Rendsburg 1988; Morris 1994.

51. Neuwirth 1980; Waldman 1986; Mir 1986 and 2000.

52. Lawson 2011: ch. 4; Schimmel 1999; Lawson 2000; Subtelny 2007.

53. Johns 1981.

54. See the resumé of much of this work in Renard 1996: 259–72 and the comprehensive Firestone 2002.

55. Amanat 1989: 202.

56. *Dharīʿa*, 1: 288.

57. *Dharīʿa*, 4: 344–46.

58. Amanat 1989: 190–91.

59. On the myth and motif of the hostile brothers in classical and modern Arabic literature, see Günther 1999.

for the hidden imam],” *intiẓār*. The characteristically Shiʿi institution of *walāya* is signaled at Q 12:101 and alluded to rather obliquely at Q 12:84. God and His representative are the proper rulers of society (no other prophet except Solomon is cast as a ruler). Thus Joseph assumes the features of the *verus propheta* so frequently discussed by Corbin in his studies of Ismaʿilism and Shiʿism as such. This is not to minimize the idea of interpretation (*taʿwīl*) mentioned more times in this sura than in any other. Another distinctive feature of sura 12 relevant to Shiʿism is that the word *bāb* or its plural *abwāb* occurs in it more than in other suras. For this reason it might have been thought to represent more fully than others the—again—characteristically Shiʿi mystery of *bābiyya*, that is, the way in which divine authority is made present and operative in the world: identifying the “door” through which it enters the world and through which the world accesses the divine. There is exegetically productive ambiguity in the term centered on the problem of whether the “door” is to God Himself or to the hidden imam.<sup>60</sup> Finally, *sūrat Yūsuf* is an appropriate subject in Shiʿism because of a long tradition that reveres the story of Joseph as representing the spiritual mystery of *taqiyya*, or pious concealment, which is so important to Shiʿi religiosity in general. Here the absence of the imam may be regarded as a species of *taqiyya*.<sup>61</sup>

In the Shiʿi *ḥadīth* literature, it is said that the *ṣāhib hādihā l-amr* (i.e., the Qāʾim) bears a certain resemblance to Joseph, one example being that this expected “proof” (*ḥujja*) is to attain eventual sovereignty over the world at some particular time (*waqt min al-awqāt*), just as Joseph gained sovereignty over Egypt.<sup>62</sup> In another report the story is told of how Joseph discovered the signs of *nubuwwa* in himself,<sup>63</sup> and an explanation of how Joseph became a *ḥujja* is given.<sup>64</sup> In the *Ikmāl al-dīn* of Ibn Bābawayh, it is mentioned that God has named Joseph “Unseen” (which is also one of the names of the Qāʾim) in Q 12:102 when He said “That is of the tidings of the Unseen”;<sup>65</sup> and the proper greeting for the Qāʾim is *al-salām ʿalayhā yā baqiyyat allāh*.<sup>66</sup> The word *baqiyya*, which denotes the divine remnant and also perhaps indicates, through a related “cloth association,” the shirt (*qamīṣ*) of Joseph, is a major topic in messianic Shiʿi discourse, where the term *baqiyyat allāh* is always a reference to the imams’ authority, *walāya*, in addition to being an honorific for the hidden imam, based partly on the exegesis of Q 11:86: *baqiyyatu llāh khayrun lakum in kuntum muʾminīn*. . . .<sup>67</sup>

Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī is quoted as saying that the *ṣāhib* of “this cause” bears resemblance to four prophets, Moses, Jesus, Joseph, and Muḥammad, and that the prison of Joseph (*sijn*) symbolizes the occultation of the imam.<sup>68</sup> The Mahdī will have a basket in which he carries relics of all the prophets, including the “cup” of Joseph.<sup>69</sup> When the Qāʾim comes, there will be great disagreement about the Qurʾan<sup>70</sup> and he will know all of the Qurʾanic sciences, including *tafsīr*, *taʿwīl*, *maʿānī*, and *nāsikh wa-mansūkh*.<sup>71</sup> It is mentioned that the

60. On this, see, for example, Amir-Moezzi 2002; see also Lawson 2011: ch. 2.

61. Strothmann 1974: 562. See now also Amanat 1989: 200–1; Clarke 2005.

62. *Burhān*, 2: 270 no. 7 (from *Kāfī*).

63. *Burhān*, 2: 271 no. 12 (from Qummi’s *tafsīr*).

64. *Burhān*, 2: 272 no. 23.

65. *Ikmāl al-dīn*: 18.

66. *Ikmāl al-dīn*: 613. Elsewhere it is mentioned that the Qāʾim will announce his message to the “east and west” that he is *baqiyyat allāh* (*Bihār*, 52: 191–92 no. 24).

67. *Mirʾāt*: 105.

68. *Bihār*, 52: 347 no. 97.

69. *Bihār*, 53: 36.

70. *Ikmāl al-dīn*: 621.

71. *Ikmāl al-dīn*: 620.

Qāʾim will appear between the *rukṅ* and the *maqām* (reference to the sanctuary in Mecca), and the people will take an oath on a new book.<sup>72</sup>

In a very long commentary on a verse in his major work, *Ziyārat al-jāmiʿa*, in which reference is made to the “return” (*rajʿa*) of the imams, Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī (d. 1826), founder of the above-mentioned Shaykhī school, mentions several, sometimes conflicting, *ḥadīths* on the subject. The return of the Qāʾim will take place during the month of Jumādā I, and before his advent (*khurūj*) there will be seven years of famine and little rain, “like the years of Joseph.”<sup>73</sup> This obviously refers to Joseph’s interpretation of the dream of the “king” (Q 12:46–49). Here al-Aḥsāʾī also mentions the tradition from Majlisī, which says that the Qāʾim will say what none other has said, and will promulgate a new book that will be difficult for the Arabs [to accept] (*kitāban jadīdan wa-huwa ʿalā l-ʿarab shadīd*).

### III. THE SHIRT OF JOSEPH AND THE MEANING OF “SPIRITUAL”

If Joseph is an emblem of order and meaning, then his most famous possession, his shirt, may be thought a metonym for the same. It is therefore of the most serious interest that this shirt, whose origins according to Islamic tradition are to be sought in the furthest remote past, represents the origins of prophethood itself and the clothing of Adam.<sup>74</sup> The shirt or mantle (*kisāʾ*), in some form, becomes the credential of all subsequent prophets, playing a number of discrete roles within the sura and Islamicate cultural life. That is, every subsequent prophet is both himself and the actual “shirt of Joseph” that carries his scent—a complex scent redolent of many connotations, themes, and motifs.<sup>75</sup>

Scent is a frequent metaphor for “spiritual” reality.<sup>76</sup> Despite its requiring a caveat here, one of the reasons “spiritual” continues to be useful, especially in the context of Islamic[ate] material, is that it captures in religious language the energy and vitality of what in other contexts may be considered from a literary angle: it is precisely the powerful literary device of typological figuration that is captured by the term.<sup>77</sup> The ultimate symbol of this literary/spiritual process or dynamic, this metaphorical and metonymical creative and revelatory

72. *Bihār*, 52: 394.

73. Al-Aḥsāʾī 1420/1999, 3: 75. The actual commentary on this verse begins on p. 48 and ends on p. 101. Much of this is taken up with the quotation of and ancillary commentary on the notoriously long apocalyptic *ḥadīth* transmitted by Mufaḍḍal from al-Ṣādiq.

74. Ricks 2000: 203. See also Bernstein 2000.

75. Note the etymological relationship between *ʿarf*, one word for ‘scent’, and *ʿirfān/maʿrifā* ‘recognition, knowledge, gnosis’.

76. Classen 1998, esp. 60. Inverted commas are used because of the skittishness the word can provoke. One assumes that such skittishness is the honest response to a semantic, semiotic, or usage problem, perhaps specific to English. The technical efficacy of the term may be thought vitiated to the degree that it seems to be applied with equal confidence and force in a number of heterogeneous contexts which may or may not have a great deal in common. However, whether as a translation of the perfectly good Arabic word *rūḥānī*—as it happens, the particular “scent” at play in the story of Joseph is an etymological relative: *rīḥ*—or simply as reference to cognate phenomena, persons, ideas, and forms, the term does say something that other words appear unable to evoke, connote, or denote. See also Classen, et al. 1994: 13, 20, 45, 69, 86, for the special interest in the aroma of garments. For scent and smell in the Qurʾan and Islam, specifically in the story of Joseph, see Stewart 2006; Schimmel 1999; Lawson 2011: chs. 2, 4; Lawson 2000, and Subtelny 2007.

77. This is not to suggest, however, that the Islamicate meaning of “spiritual” is exhausted by the literary device of typological figuration. But it is certainly one important component of the broader category of “spiritual.” Other layers of the notion would include ethics, comportment, and learning itself, as represented by the categories *adab* and *akhlāq*, which rescue the idea of “spiritual” from pertaining solely to abstract intellectual constructs, tying it to practice in the here and now. But this is not the subject at hand.

energy, is Joseph's garment, which the Qur'an calls a shirt (*qamiṣ*) and the Hebrew Bible calls a coat of many colors (*kethoneth*).

Like a number of other important terms in the remarkable sura of Joseph, the shirt appears in several key contexts that may be thought to mark important narrative transitions in the story. In the first mention, the idea of the garment, if not the actual garment itself, is used by the perfidious brothers to demonstrate that they had done nothing wrong (Q 12:18). The false garment's appearance with false blood marks the departure of Joseph from Canaan and his journey to Egypt. The second appearance is when Joseph's actual garment exonerates him from the crime and sin of lust (Q 12:25–27), and by extension ingratitude (*kufṛ*). It marks the beginning of his imprisonment, when his true gifts as a man of God and divine knowledge are destined to be revealed and as a result of which his status in Egypt is elevated beyond what anyone might have reasonably predicted. The third appearance is after the truth has been revealed, the dénouement, as it were. For all intents and purposes the story has ended, needing only the quick succession of the events that follow to burn the truth of these events into the minds of the audience. Joseph tells his astonished brothers—who could never have imagined that their despised brother might have achieved such success, notoriety, and power in Egypt—to take his shirt with them back to Canaan where Jacob languishes blind, in grief and separation from his beloved son, Joseph, and, by association and dramatic action, Benjamin (Q 12:93). They are commanded to lay the shirt on Jacob's face so that the “magical” divine healing power of the shirt—its smell, fragrance, perfume—will restore Jacob's eyesight, eyesight that was “washed away” in weeping for his beloved son (Q 12:84). In a subsequent complex scene, the power of the shirt and its perfume is dramatized in a most compelling manner.

The instant the Canaan-bound caravan of Joseph's brothers crosses the border from Egypt there is what would be called in cinema a cutaway to Jacob's bedside. There is probably no more moving or powerful vignette in the Qur'an. The grieving, languishing, aged prophet and patriarch of Israel, despairing of the continuance of his prophetic line and the loss of his two favorite sons, is suddenly stimulated, practically resurrected, to new life and joyous hope. His beloved Joseph lives:

And as soon as the caravan [with which Jacob's sons were traveling] was on its way [and out of Egypt], [94] their father said [to the people around him]: “Behold, were it not that you might consider me a dotard, [I would say that] I truly feel the breath of Joseph [in the air]!”

Both Sunni and Shi'ī exegetes agree that the reason Jacob knew his son was alive was because of the special scent the shirt bore, the shirt that the brothers had with them in the returning caravan. The final scenes of the sura represent a circular closure<sup>78</sup> of a narrative exemplified in what I have called elsewhere an apocalypse of reunion.<sup>79</sup> Here the love of Jacob for Joseph, also originally (if tacitly in the Qur'anic text) symbolized by the shirt, is consummated in the migration of the entire family from Canaan to Egypt, to live in exalted status more or less “happily ever after” as a vindication and dramatic proof of the efficacy of the God of Jacob, His power and, of course, superiority.<sup>80</sup> The story of Joseph, whether in

78. Mir 1986.

79. Lawson 2011: ch. 4.

80. Obviously, this is a somewhat ironic usage. But the Qur'an ends the story of Joseph on a note of “happily ever after” to emphasize the wisdom and salvific value of obedience and *tawhīd*. After all, this was not just any family who was thus rescued, but the “holy remnant” of Abrahamic monotheism for which Islam is the most recent dispensation. Thus it is also representative of the rescue of “true Islam.” Later, of course, in this specific historical circumstance, the fortunes of the Children of Israel in Egypt take a turn for the worse. Again, Israel (and therefore

the Hebrew Bible and Tradition or in the Qurʾan, represents also what may be thought a true model of the epic drama of the Hebrew people and, as in the case of the Qurʾan, the Muslims. Such an epic may be on the grand historical scale, or on the scale of the interior spiritual life of the soul.<sup>81</sup> In the Qurʾan the story of Joseph has an added function in that it represents the thickening or intensification and perfection of heretofore imperfectly completed narrative gestures in its partial and somewhat aborted telling of the stories of other prophets. The sura of Joseph is a crescendo of the Qurʾanic narrative art and, coming as it does “protected” near the center of the *muṣḥaf*, it functions as a reminder, an unambiguous statement of the Qurʾanic “theory of prophethood and salvation” that may be only incompletely or partially detected elsewhere in the Book.<sup>82</sup> It thus functions in the same way as the clear statement of a melodic theme does in the context of what might otherwise be challenging or opaque improvisation and variation.<sup>83</sup> It is here that the reader is given the whole truth about the prophetic office. It delineates in dramatic form and much detail the basic curve of the life and career of one chosen by God to carry and relate a special message, a revelation. In reading “the best of stories” one can readily contemplate and understand the life of the Prophet Muḥammad: his birth, his destined greatness from an early age, his rejection by his relatives, his love of women, his piety and steadfastness, his ability to reveal the true meaning of events, his position as wielder of political and social authority, his wisdom, beauty, fairness, patience, betrayals, the hiddenness of his true greatness until the appointed time, his concern with “the Hour,” with law, with forgiveness, and, of course, with civilization.<sup>84</sup>

Previous discussion of typological figuration in the Qurʾan has concentrated not on the sura of Joseph, but on the sura of the Poets (*al-shuʿarāʾ*, Q 26), where it is demonstrated that the sura actually functions as a catalogue of prophetic types (sg. *zawj*) and their opposites (in this case precisely not antagonists, but rather antitypes or reflections of the original type) in order categorically to identify Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh as one of their number.<sup>85</sup> To be sure, Michael Zwettler did address the problem of the antagonist or “enemy” of the prophet. It is not Iblīs or Shayṭān or even the Quraysh, at least not on the literary level. Rather it is the poet. And here is where we gain another important insight. The Qurʾan is not poetry. But this is not because it is not “poetic” or artistically compelling.<sup>86</sup> It is because the Prophet Muḥammad was not a poet. The social function of the poet was utterly different and in many ways antithetical to the social function of the prophet. The poet was the champion of the status quo at best, as we are familiar with his pre-Islamic avatar. The prophet was the champion of change. The poet’s talents were for hire; he was not expected to enunciate a moral

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ultimately the future Islam) is rescued by the prophet Moses. This is doubtless part of the contemporary reception of the sura of Joseph: the audience (i.e., Muḥammad’s audience) is led to see themselves as the heroes of the Abrahamic line and the guardians of Islam. As mentioned earlier, typological figuration applies to both the prophetic figures and their communities. On the importance of Joseph to the identity of Israel, see Kugel 1990, esp. 13–27: “Indeed, relatively early in the biblical period, the figure of Joseph came to be profoundly affected by political change. . . . if there nevertheless remained a hope that ‘the Lord, the God of hosts, may be gracious to the remnant of Joseph’ (Amos 5:15), this hope became dimmer and dimmer.” (p. 17) But it did not die.

Joseph’s coffin was carried by Moses and his fellow exiles from Egypt to the Promised Land. But first they had to find it. On this, see Benin 2000: 32.

81. As in Philo or the Sunni and Sufi ʿAlāʾ al-Dawla Simnānī, whose influential theory of the interior prophets of the individual soul is studied in Corbin 1978: 121–31; and generally by Elias 1995.

82. For an exceptionally lucid analysis, which emphasizes the important fact that typological figuration flows in two directions, see the recent discussion in Stewart 2010.

83. For a general comparison between prose writing and musical improvisation, see Jarrett 1999.

84. This point is made, somewhat incompletely, in Stern 1985.

85. Zwettler 1990.

86. For an unapologetic insistence upon the artistic nature of this sura, see Bajouda 1992.

or ethical code, much less exemplify one; and most importantly, the source of his inspiration was not God through an angel, rather it was any one of a number of lesser pneumatic beings, jinn or gods, the acceptance of which entailed the unforgivable sin identified by the Qur'an as *shirk*. By ranging the whole history of monotheistic prophecy against the concerns of the institution of Arabic poetic culture, the Qur'an identifies the experience of Muḥammad with the experience of earlier prophets from Abraham to Jesus. As is well known, so congenial was such a typological argument that later Islamic tradition posited the existence of 124,000 prophets to account for the whole sweep and progress of earthly human history, even if the history of humanity has its beginning in a much more mysterious realm.<sup>87</sup>

A concise and persuasive example of the centrality of typological figuration may be seen in the comparison and ultimate identification of Muḥammad's mission with that of another prophet, Ṣāliḥ. The journey from history to myth to apocalypse and the return to history is charted in the typological relationship established between Ṣāliḥ and Thamūd and the Prophet Muḥammad and his community. Jaroslav Stetkevych has illuminated the way in which Islam sees Muḥammad's mission as an identification with and fulfillment of Ṣāliḥ's mission in his discovery of the golden bough that was buried in the apocalyptic ruins of Thamūd.<sup>88</sup> The great apocalyptic scream (*ṣayḥa*) here represents the totality of the drama of prophecy and its rejection in one near-synaesthetic gesture.<sup>89</sup> Al-Tha'labī's version of the cataclysm is instructive:

There came upon them a *scream* from heaven, in which there was the sound of every thunderbolt and the voice of every thing on earth that has a voice, and it cut through their hearts and breasts, and they all perished, young and old.<sup>90</sup>

Typology requires symmetry. Symmetry requires duality. Duality is a sine qua non of typological figuration. By virtue of the compelling symmetry and therefore sacred meaning, the scream continues to be heard behind the music of every Qur'anic verse. It is this looming divine intervention that contributes so much to the electric sense of presence (viz., *sakīna*) in an encounter with the Qur'an.<sup>91</sup>

Typological figuration is more powerful than logical argumentation precisely because its rhetorical verve is felt to derive from some supra-logical region. There is a similarity between "causality" and "typology." Both are rhetorically effective. The main difference is that causality is dependent upon ratiocination, investigation of phenomena, and the "scientific" method. As such it is concerned mainly with the past "on the principle that the past is all we genuinely or systematically know." Typology does relate to the future, and the facul-

87. Such beginnings are rooted in the mythopoeic Q 7:172, the day of the covenant or day of *alast*. The classic treatment of the motif in Sufism is Böwering 1980. On this central theme, see al-Qāḍī 2006; see also Lawson 2009.

88. Stetkevych 1996.

89. *ṣayḥa*: also 'shout' as in 'battle cry'. Similar Qur'anic words, such as *nidā'* 'voice', 'call', also afford messianic and apocalyptic resonances in both the Qur'an and exegesis. For the Shi'ī messianic understanding of the same scream, see Madelung 1978.

90. Stetkevych 1996: 61, translating al-Tha'labī 1298h. For the scream, see Q 11:67, 94; 15:73, 83; 23:41; 29:40; 36:29, 49, 53; 38:15; 50:42; 54:31; 63:4. See Klar 2009. Al-Tha'labī's role as a seminal figure in the history of *tafsīr* has recently been elucidated and convincingly argued by Saleh 2004.

91. Such compelling literary "moments" are not, of course, restricted to the Qur'an. Recall the "Qur'anic ambience" in the opening lines of Gerard Manley Hopkins "God's Grandeur":

The World is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?

See A. H. Johns 1993: 43 for an earlier comparison of the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins with the Qur'an.

ties by which it is enlivened are “faith, hope, and vision.” Logical, causal thinking functions in one “tense” whereas typological thinking assumes a future, and can even transcend time itself. Typological thinking bespeaks a desire to awaken from the “nightmare of history” and is “essentially a revolutionary form of thought and rhetoric.”<sup>92</sup>

The shirt of Joseph is an especially apt emblem of typological figuration. The typological weaving, generation, and embellishment of this unique textile (< text, credential, revelation, information) narreme (a word not admitted to the OED) is a distinctively Islamic process, fascinating to trace throughout the exegetic literature.<sup>93</sup> In a sense, all fabrics are related, either positively or negatively, to the shirt of Joseph. That is, it may be seen to represent “fabric” itself, a metonym for culture, civilization, the cross-connected lines of the various fates of humans and human fate as such.<sup>94</sup> As a fabric it is related to all clothing, including veils, and as such is capable of concealing and revealing, frequently at the same time. This suggests the mystical process of *iltibās* or amphiboly that Corbin analyzed in the writings of Rūzbihān Baqlī.<sup>95</sup> The shirt is also a symbol or emblem of the passage of time and narrative development and by association all narrative continuity. It is a bearer of the heavenly scent of Joseph and all prophets, because of its intimate relationship (*viz.*, *walāya*) to both the prophets and its point of origin, God. Like *walāya* itself, a category explicitly mentioned in Q 12:101 and obliquely alluded to in Q 12:84, it protects, distinguishes, comforts, and identifies its bearers and those who participate in (affirm) their *walāya*.<sup>96</sup> That the shirt is one symbol for all salvation history—*Heilsgeschichte*<sup>97</sup>—is also suggested by the fact that it only occurs in the sura of Joseph and that this sura, based on features of its form and content discussed above, may be seen as a kind of Qurʾan “in miniature.”<sup>98</sup> That is to say, if the shirt is the centerpiece of the sura, and the sura itself is the centerpiece of the Qurʾan with regard to narrative art and coherence, then its primacy is compelling. This would appear to be one of the points of traditional exegesis, whether Sunni or Shiʿi. In this vast body of literature, there is a clear consensus that Joseph’s shirt is one of those “divine artifacts” or “evidences” that come from the unseen realm.<sup>99</sup> This is in addition to the striking way in which its own

92. Frye 1982: 82–83.

93. “Narreme” is a technical term in the relatively recent science known as “narratology.” It is defined as a self-standing unit of a narrative composition on the model of “morpheme” or “mytheme.” For a narrative approach to the Qurʾanic story of Joseph, see Gasmi 1977 and 1986.

94. That the woven fabric represents a “manifestation” of the coincidence of opposites (warp ≠ woof) may also be of interest.

95. Corbin 1971, vol. 3, index (*ibid.*, vol. 4), s.v. “amphibolie, *iltibās*.” A cognate perspective is found in William Blake as discussed by Frye 1969: 381–82:

This is the power of seeing the physical appearance as the covering of the mental reality, yet not concealing its shape so much as revealing it in a fallen aspect and so not the clothing but the body or form of the mental world, though a physical and therefore a fallen body or form. If we try to visualize this development of the “clothing” symbol, we get something more like a mirror, a surface which reveals reality in fewer dimensions than it actually has.

96. While it may reasonably be questioned whether such a subtle occurrence of the root *w-l-y* here in Q 12:84 can be so significant, it should be remembered that in Shiʿi *tafsir* such otherwise apparently “weak” occasions may serve the exegete in surprising ways. This has been amply demonstrated in Lawson 2004: 163–97.

97. When used to speak about Islam, *Heilsgeschichte* must always be understood to emphasize the entering of the divinity or holiness into actual history through the agency of prophecy. Thus it may also be translated as “divine history,” which in some ways may actually be closer to the German, where “salvation” is actually *Erlösung*.

98. See above, p. 227.

99. Following (in alphabetical order) are some of the Sunni authors who read the Qurʾan this way at Q 12:93: Abū Hayyān, Abū Suʿūd, al-Baghawī, Baqlī, al-Biqāʾī, al-Fayruzabādī, al-Ghāʾinātī, al-Ḥalabī, Ibn ʿAbd al-Sallām, Ibn ʿĀjība, Ibn ʿAṭīya, Ibn ʿĀdil, Ibn al-Jawzī, pseudo-Ibn al-ʿArabī (i.e., al-Kāshānī), Ismāʿīl Ḥaqqī, al-Khāzin, Mujāhid, Muqātil, al-Nasafī, al-Qummī, al-Naysabūrī, al-Qurṭubī, al-Suyūṭī, al-Ṭabarī, al-Thaʿlabī, al-Thaʿālabī,

specific narrative structure, brilliantly explicated by Mustansir Mir, offers numerous clues for the way in which the Qur'an itself may be read, thus cracking another code.

The symbol of the cloak may be seen to have developed out of the ancient practice of holy men and diviners, who kept the "exterior world at a distance" by wearing a special robe.<sup>100</sup> In Shi'ī works reference is often made to "the people of the cloak" (*ahl al-kisā'*), who are specified as Muḥammad, 'Alī, Fāṭima, Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn.<sup>101</sup> Whether Twelver or Sevener, Shi'ī writers use this designation to express the idea that Muḥammad's special qualities were transmitted to his progeny through contact with his mantle. Corbin called attention to the powerful role of exegetical typological figuration in the early consolidation and identity building of Twelver Shi'ism. He pointed out that it represents a major moment when the famous scene of the *mubāhala* is typologically identified in the *Tafsīr* ascribed to al-Ḥasan al-'Askarī with the annunciation of Jesus:

The vastness of theological meaning found in this scene by Shiite meditation may be measured by the fact that the *tafsīr* attributed to Imām Ḥasan 'Askarī, the eleventh Imām of the Duodeciman Shiites, expressly establishes a typological relation between the Koranic verses [esp. Q 33:33, see also Q 53:3–4 and 81:19–29] evoking the Annunciation and the conjunction of the Holy Spirit with Jesus, and this scene in which Gabriel the Holy Spirit joins the five hypostases of the original Imāmate. It is precisely here that Shiism inaugurates the transition from Angel Christology to Imāmology.<sup>102</sup>

The word *qamīṣ* appears in the Qur'an only in sura 12, where it is mentioned six times. First at 12:18, where Joseph's brothers are described as having put false blood on his shirt in an attempt to deceive Jacob, claiming that a wolf had eaten their brother. At 12:25–28 the *qamīṣ* figures prominently in the well-known episode with Zulaykha, Potiphar's wife, where the guilt or innocence of Joseph is determined by whether the shirt is torn at the front or the back.<sup>103</sup> An interesting comment on this scene occurs in the *tafsīr* of the Sufi Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896). The entire ordeal has as its purpose a demonstration of the efficacy of divine "proof" (*burhān*) without which Joseph would have been abandoned to his "defeated" (*maghlūb*) condition because "he had permitted the desire for Potiphar's wife to rise in his lower self."<sup>104</sup> In the context of the entire narrative, such "defeat" is dramatically contrasted with Joseph's eventual role of powerful minister, which he wins as a result of properly interpreting the Pharaoh's dream. Indeed, so important is this ultimate rise to power and victory—which in the event must also include victory over the self as well as over the perfidious

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al-Zamakhsharī. Accessed through [www.tafsir.com](http://www.tafsir.com), July 2010. As far as the heavenly origin of the shirt is concerned, there is no disagreement across sectarian boundaries.

100. Meier 1966: 421. See now also Greifenhagen 2009.

101. See the *ḥadīth al-kisā'*, related on the authority of Fāṭima, daughter of Muḥammad, in *Mafāṭih*, 386–89, with its specific reference to the "sweet fragrance" (*rā'iḥa ṭayyiba*) of the prophet's mantle (lit. "Yemeni cloak," *al-kisā' al-yamānī*). Here, Ḥasan and other members of the *ahl al-bayt* exclaim in turn upon entering Fāṭima's house, "I detect something like the fragrance of my grandfather." The spiritual reality of the cloak and the physical reality of the Prophet have become one. My thanks to Arsheen Devji for drawing my attention to this important spiritual drama. See also Momen 1985: 14.

102. Corbin 1983: 75.

103. In the early exegetical work *Kitāb Asās al-ta'wīl*, by the Ismā'īlī *dā'ī* Qāḍī al-Nu'mān (d. 363/974), the interesting comment is made to the effect that the "front" and "back" of the shirt refer to exoteric and esoteric knowledge respectively (p. 144). The *qamīṣ* in verse Q 12:93 is seen as representing *imāma* (p. 163). See al-Nu'mān 2008.

104. Böwering 1980: 256.



brothers—that the key phrase is repeated in this sura: “Thus did we empower Joseph over the land,” *wa-kadhālika makkannā li-Yūsuf fi l-arḍ* (Q 12:21, 56).<sup>105</sup>

Finally, for the present discussion the most important mention comes at Q 12:93. Joseph’s brothers have finally recognized him as a highly placed official in Egypt, whereupon Joseph instructs them: “Go, take this my shirt, and cast it on my father’s face, and he shall recover his sight; then bring me your family altogether.” When Jaʿfar al-Šādiq was asked about the shirt of Joseph, he responded that when Abraham was burning in the fire (Q 21:68–69), Gabriel came down with the shirt and clothed him with it so that he would not be harmed. Abraham gave this shirt to Isaac, who gave it to Jacob. When Joseph was born, Jacob gave the shirt to him. It was this shirt, originally sent from heaven, by which Jacob detected the scent of Joseph (Q 12:93).<sup>106</sup> Al-Šādiq was then asked what became of this shirt, to which he responded that the shirt stayed with the descendants of Joseph and is now in the possession of “our Qāʾim” because all the prophets inherit knowledge and other things from one another.<sup>107</sup>

The author of the encyclopedic Akhbarī Shīʿī lexicon *Mirʾāt al-anwār* says of *qamīš* that its exoteric meaning is well known, but that its *taʾwīl* is connected with the words *thiyāb* and *libās*.<sup>108</sup> The first word is defined as representing the knowledge with which the imams have been endowed, and by extension refers to *walāya* proper.<sup>109</sup> The second word carries a complex of meanings that include, together with the idea of garment, “deception.”<sup>110</sup> For the former, al-ʿĀmilī-Iṣfahānī refers to several verses in the Qurʾan, among which is 2:187, where it is stated that spouses are as a garment to each other. For the latter, he cites Q 2:42 in which those who disguise the truth with falsehood are condemned. Ultimately, however, the word *libās* is seen as a symbol of the *walāya* of the imams.<sup>111</sup>

In his commentary on *al-Qaṣīda al-lāmiyya*, Sayyid Kāẓim Rashtī (d. 1843–44) takes the opportunity to dilate on the implications of the word *qamīš*, which occurs in one of its verses.<sup>112</sup> The poet has compared the curtain (*satr*) of the tomb of the Prophet with the *qamīš* of Joseph, stressing that the spiritual “fragrance” of the former is far greater than that of the latter.<sup>113</sup> Rashtī says that however powerful the fragrance of the shirt of Joseph might have

105. The same phrase occurs one other time, in Q 18:84, where it is used to describe how God gave “security throughout the land” to Dhū l-Qarnayn, frequently identified with Alexander the Great in *tafsīr*.

106. Sufi literature on the initiatory *khirqā* speaks of its heavenly origin also, and mentions the *qamīš* of Joseph (with which the *khirqā* is compared) as that which protected Abraham from the fire. Al-Suhrawardī 1965: 95–102. For a broader survey of Sufi writers on the robe, see Eliās 2001 and now the useful article “Joseph” by Dadbeh et al. in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.

107. *Nūr*, 2: 462 no. 187. The compiler adds that a similar tradition is found in *Kāfi*. (This tradition from *Kāfi* is found in *Burhān*, 2: 269 no. 1.) *Nūr* (2:463 no. 191) quotes the *Ikmāl al-dīn*: “When the Qāʾim comes forth, the shirt of Joseph will be on him, and he will have the staff of Moses and the ring of Solomon.” The heavenly origin of this shirt was also taught by the early exegete al-Kalbī (d. 150/767) in what Wansbrough (1977: 134) termed “a reflex of Rabbinic descriptions” of the robe in Genesis.

108. On Abū l-Ḥasan al-ʿĀmilī-Iṣfahānī, the author of *Mirʾāt al-anwār*, see Amir-Moezzi 2010.

109. *Mirʾāt*: 110.

110. As in the famous title of Ibn al-Jawzī’s *Talbīs Iblīs*.

111. *Mirʾāt*: 294–95. In discussing the connotations of “deception” that the word carries, this author refers to Q 6:72 (“those who do not clothe their faith in darkness”), and says that this refers to those who did not confuse the *walāya* with the *walāya* of “so-and-so and so-and-so.” It might be asked whether *fulān wa-fulān* is an editorial substitution for more derogatory appellations in reference to the first three caliphs of Sunni Islam, such as those found in Kohlberg and Amir-Moezzi 2009: e.g., 161.

112. Rashtī 1270: 68. The verse is *aʿṭaytu mā lam yaḥṣa Yaʿqūb bihi idh jāʾahu bi-shadhā l-qamīš al-shamāl*.

113. The fascinating relationship—typological and otherwise—between the celebrated mantle or *burda* of the Prophet Muḥammad is, unfortunately, not pursued here due to lack of space. See the recent magisterial study of the poetry in S. P. Stetkevych 2010, where Joseph (but not his shirt) appears on pp. 96, 130, 172.

been, it cannot compare with the much stronger power of the curtain of the Prophet's mausoleum. Interestingly, the power of the shirt comes from Joseph's having worn it, rather than from the heavenly origin of the shirt. Jacob could detect its perfume from a great distance, because both he and Joseph were a "single aspect" of the "seal of the prophets" (*lamā kāna Ya'qūb wa-Yūsuf 'alayhumā al-salām wajhan min wujūh khātam al-anbiyā'*). Presumably this means that Jacob could detect his son's presence precisely because he also was a bearer of *walāya* and therefore in reality they were one and the same. Since Joseph's shirt acquired its "fragrance" (i.e., power) from physical contact, the "fragrance" acquired from physical closeness to the Prophet's tomb must be even stronger. Therefore, while it was the power of the fragrance of the shirt of Joseph that caused Jacob's physical sight to be restored, the perfume of his "shirt" (i.e., the *satr* of the tomb) is incomparably stronger and will give spiritual sight to those who regard it with the "eye of reality."<sup>114</sup>

In an interesting, if marginalized, literary gesture in *Tafsīr sūrat Yūsuf* by 'Alī Muḥammad Shīrāzī (d. 1850), known to history as the Bāb, it is argued that the *qamīš* of Joseph represents a power equivalent to the *satr* of the tomb of the Prophet. The symbol of the shirt of Joseph is immediately associated with the bees mentioned in Qur'an 16 (*sūrat al-naḥl*), which reflects an early Shi'ī identification of these bees with the imams, for just as the bees produce honey "in which there is a healing for mankind" so the imams dispense healing knowledge.<sup>115</sup> Such an apparently incongruous and abrupt association of the bees with Joseph's shirt is quite typical of the Bāb's method throughout this commentary. The Bāb seems to take the bees out of thin air. This air is actually the exceedingly rich atmosphere of the Shi'ī exegetical tradition.

#### CONCLUSION

The story of Joseph has a special place in Islam and in the Qur'an. It may be offered that while Abraham and/or Moses have frequently been considered the ideal exemplar for Muḥammadan prophecy,<sup>116</sup> a study of the shirt of Joseph suggests that this *qamīš* may have also served as a veil for another possibility. It is actually Joseph who represents a truer type—or at least a more complete type—for the Prophet, whether among Sunni exegetes or Shi'ī. In this amplitude of Qur'anic detail and narrative there is rhetorical power.

There is a special attraction in Shi'ism for the story of Joseph, but it is central to Islamic religion for a number of reasons. The *qamīš* of Joseph is an efficient emblem of the Islamicate notions of prophethood, revelation, and *walāya* because it bears their scent, a scent that is at once complex and unmistakably borne upon the shirt, or cloak, that both reveals and conceals. In poetry, the shirt of Joseph is equated with the "Muḥammad (*centifolia*) rose," recognized as having the most complex perfume of any of the roses. The *Tafsīr sūrat Yūsuf* ascribed to al-Ghazālī lists seven different types of scent borne upon the *qamīš* of Joseph.<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, because of its function as a marker of narrative progression in the sura of Joseph, it is also a symbol of historical continuity-within-change, eschatological hope and order in the face of chaos. This scent carries all of the information we have been given in the sura and in the Tales of the Prophets, in addition to summoning up the remembrance of the primordial covenant, a reunion of all of those "children of Adam" (humanity) who before time joined in their assent to the sovereignty of God. Perfume is the perfect conveyor of this

114. Ibid.

115. Lawson 2004: 164; see also Lawson 2011: ch. 4 and appendices for a closer look at the Bāb's commentary.

116. On Abraham as model and exemplar, see Firestone 1990; see also Paret 1971. On Islam/Muḥammad's similar esteem for Moses, see now Wheeler 2002. See also the very interesting discussion by Moreen 1994.

117. Al-Ghazālī 1895: 198.

experience because it manages to communicate simultaneously both absence and presence, a powerful coincidence of opposites and one that distinguishes itself among all other sensory experiences because of the way it conjures the past, making it one with the present, and giving the experience of an obliteration of distance between the subject and the object.<sup>118</sup>

While the focus here on Shiʿi and Bābī texts may raise questions as to the applicability of minoritarian views to an overall picture, it should be recalled that in all cases the point of departure has been the Qurʾan. Joseph is no less or no more a symbol of the Beloved in any of these intellectual or pietistic traditions than he was, say, for Avicenna.<sup>119</sup> It is not the business of the scholar to adjudicate claims of self-identifying Muslims. By offering a wide spectrum of Muslim, or if preferred, Islamicate, interpretation, a fuller picture of Islam emerges.<sup>120</sup> By mining these frequently marginalized sources it is hoped to shed light on heretofore unsuspected or insufficiently understood and emphasized features of the Islamic tradition, including the importance of typological figuration as a distinctively Islamic mode of iconic spiritual encounter and contemplation.<sup>121</sup>

118. Classen et al. 1994: 60. See also the fascinating and inspiring study of the “anthropology of air, scent, and wind,” Parkin 2007. Scent also distinguishes itself from other senses by acting directly on the brain without intermediary.

119. Corbin 1980: 75. See also Corbin 1996: 86. Another source—perhaps equally “marginal” but from another tradition—would be that at the center of the study by Ebied and Young 1975.

120. For the prominence of Joseph in the post-Bābī religious development known as the Bahaʿi faith, see Lawson forthcoming b. The recent book referred to here is Cragg 2009. For a related and most stimulating study from the perspective of the Western literary tradition, including the Qurʾan, see Bal 2008.

121. In line with an axiom of the discipline of religious studies that so-called “heresies” say as much about their corresponding “orthodoxies”—and vice-versa—as they do about themselves.

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*Burhān*: al-Bahrānī, Hāshim. *Kitāb al-Burhān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*. 4 vols. Tehran: Chapkhānah-i Āftāb, 1375/1955.

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*EI*<sup>1</sup>: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*<sup>1</sup>, ed. M. Th. Houtsma et al. 4 vols. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1913–1936, repr. 1987.

*EI*<sup>2</sup>: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*<sup>2</sup>, ed. P. J. Bearman et al. 12 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1960–2004.

*GAL*: Brockelmann, Carl. *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1937–49. The convoluted reference system of *GAL* is upheld; viz. for *GAL* I and II the numeration designates the marginal numbers (the page numbers of the original edition) and for S I, II, and III the page numbers.

*Ikmāl al-dīn*: Ibn Bābawayh, Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī. *Ikmāl al-dīn wa-itmām al-niʿma fī ithbāt al-rajʿa*. Najaf: al-Maṭbaʿa al-Ḥaydariyya, 1970.

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