

The Implied Audience in *Yūsuf*: An analysis of literary techniques in *sūrah*  
twelve of the *Qur'ān*

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## Abstract

The following study uses the literary framework of the implied reader developed by Wolfgang Iser (1972) to examine how the text of the twelfth chapter of the Qur'ān uses literary techniques to affect and instruct its implied audience. The focus here is on the literary techniques employed in the text, the effects they can have on a hypothetical audience and the potential responses that they invite from this audience.

The Introduction sets out the hypothesis that the text of this chapter of the Qur'ān implies both a believing Muslim audience who need to be re-affirmed in their faith, and a non-believing audience who need to be taught about the faith and encouraged to accept it as superior to any religious philosophies that they may already hold. The text achieves these didactic purposes through extensive employment of engaging literary techniques. Structural Hermeneutics, Content Analysis, as well as Inter-textual Hermeneutics and Historical Analysis are established as ideal methods to be employed in the study.

The Literature Review confirms that this focus on an implied audience (and in fact on an audience at all) is relatively novel. Previous scholarship is revealed to have first tended to focus on historical and comparative studies of the Qur'an and the narrative of Yūsuf, with extensive literary studies in the western world appearing on the scene within the last few decades. A cursory review of the literature on implied readership theory shows that while its hermeneutic branch has been employed by some writers like Navid Kermani (2000) on Qur'ānic studies, its literary element was still to be explored in relation to the Islamic scripture.

The Analysis, Findings and Discussions reveal that the text employs many literary techniques such as narrative style and structure, parallelism, symbolism, dramatic irony, choice of lexis and address amongst others to relay theological and philosophical Islamic messages relating to ontology, metaphysics and epistemology to an inclusive audience. The study concludes by highlighting how there is much room for further research on how these messages conveyed by the text have been taken up by various actual audiences of the Qur'ān over the years.

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## 1. Introduction

This study aims to analyse the literary techniques employed in *sūrah* (chapter) twelve of the Qur’ān with a view to examining what effects they can have on an implied audience and what potential responses they invite from the audience. A literary analysis of *Yūsuf* is not only significant due to the *sūrah*’s uniqueness for containing the longest, continuous and chronological narrative in the Qur’ān, but it is also prompted by its *asbāb al-nuzūl* – reasons believed by Muslims to have been the cause for its revelation. In his exegesis, the *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*, al-Wāḥidī relates a report from ‘Awn ibn ‘Abd Allāh, a companion of Muḥammad, stating that it was in response to the declared boredom of the companions that the one of the opening verses of this *sūrah* – “We narrate unto thee (Muḥammad) the best of narratives...” – was revealed (al-Wāḥidī, 2008). No other part of the Qur’ān is recorded to have been revealed with the purpose to engage or to please an audience; indicating the importance of an audience for this text. In spite of this, while its literary features have received some scholarly attention, there has been no systematic study of audience or readership in relation to this narrative.

As indicated in the Literature Review in section two of this study, relatively little attention has been paid to the literary functions of this *sūrah* within western academia. Furthermore, works that have focused on the literary features of the *sūrah* do not dwell on the audience. They either do not acknowledge that by employing extensive and elaborate literary features the text implies a reader or listener who will decipher these features, or they simply take the audience for granted. To address this gap in research, the concept of an implied audience will be used as a guiding principle in this study to examine how the text seeks to inform and instruct an audience (thus achieving its didactic purpose) through the effects of its literary techniques (thus making the didactic process engaging).

### 1.1. Defining key terms and theoretical frameworks

While actual readers and listeners of the Qur’ān over the centuries range from the early companions of Muḥammad to modern readers, the focus of this study will be on the text itself and how it presents key messages of the Islamic faith to a hypothetical audience. The theory of implied readership will therefore be used as a guiding framework for the study since the theory is concerned with a general hypothetical audience implied by the text itself, rather than any concrete reader or listener present at any point in history. Examples of the latter will only be brought into the discussion to support and illuminate the responses that literary features of the text appear to invite.

The concept of an implied reader underlying this research originates from the literary critic Wayne Booth (1961) and was further developed by Wolfgang Iser (1972). The implied reader of a text is not a specific concrete reader of a text at any given point in history, but a hypothetical reader implied by the text through the way it "...structures responses, in the form of a network of schemata, patterns, points of view, and indeterminacies that require and constrain interpretation" (Oxford Reference, 2016). In other words, the focus of this phenomenological theory is on how the text offers itself to a potential reader to be read, interpreted and engaged with. For the purposes of analysing the Qur'ān – which has not only been read but also recited and received orally over the centuries – the concept of the implied reader will be extended to include recipients of both literary and oral presentations of the Qur'ān, and hence will be rephrased as the implied audience.

Iser's (1972) framework of the implied reader is particularly pertinent to a literary analysis of *Sūrah Yūsuf*. Underlying his work was "...the conviction that the literary text as an example for the aesthetic had a function radically different from other types of discourse and that in the text-reader relationship too much had been taken for granted, or not taken into account at all, by traditional criticism." (Shi, 2013, p.983). A literary text is different from others because it has the added purpose of conveying its content in an entertaining or engaging manner. Though *Sūrah Yūsuf* is not fictive literature – which Iser primarily dealt with – its *asbāb al-nuzūl* indicates that it too is different from other chapters of the Qur'ān due to its declared aesthetic function. Furthermore, the "text-reader relationship" is also one that has generally been overlooked in Qur'ānic studies.

The implied readership theory is also fruitful for analysing the Qur'ānic text since, rather than confining itself to examining how any particular person or group has been affected and influenced by a text, it examines features of the text itself, which can invite potential responses from an audience at any moment in time. Commenting upon literature, Iser remarked that if "...we are to try and understand the effects caused and the responses elicited by literary works, we must allow for the reader's presence without in any way predetermining his character or his historical situation. We may call him...the implied reader." (Iser, 1978, p. 34). He aptly highlights the importance of considering the role of the audience in the reception of a text, while at the same time acknowledging that a work can be read by many readers with diverse dispositions and from diverse historical backgrounds. This framework is useful to apply to a text that theologically presents itself as addressing the whole of humanity from Muḥammad onwards.

By utilising a reader-response theory based on the idea that meaning is guided by the text, this study does not deny the possibility of the interpretations of actual readers differing from the responses that the text appears to invite. A twenty-first century feminist reading of the Qur'ān like that of Asma Barlas (2002) will inevitably differ in some respects to a traditional, medieval exegesis. The literary techniques employed in the Qur'ān in general and in *Sūrah Yūsuf*, do not eliminate different responses, but they do have the potential to guide them, and this study aims to examine how the text seeks to do this.

Amongst the literary techniques that the study will examine are: semantics and choice of lexis, register, dramatic irony, form of address, characterisation, narrative style and structure (including analysis of perspective and the narrator's role), structure of the text, word-play, syntax, grammatical shifts, parallelism and symbolism.

## **1.2. Hypothesis and Research Questions**

Anjelika Neuwirth (2003) suggests that the moralising verses of *Sūrah Yūsuf* and other parts of the Qur'ān are addressed towards an audience with whom the narrator has "a basic consensus...on human moral behaviour..." (Neuwirth, 2003, p.13); in other words, an audience who partake in the belief-system that the Qur'ān espouses. The hypothesis of this study builds on this to suggest that *Sūrah Yūsuf* implies both an audience who believe in Islam as well as a non-believing audience. Through its use of literary techniques the text engages its reader or listener, provides religious (and moral) instructions in subtle and intriguing ways, and emphasises Islamic teachings found in other parts of the Qur'ān or in accompanying religious literature like the *ahadīth* (traditions of Muḥammad). The audience for whom it does this can be Muslim or Muslim, thus rendering the text more inclusive in its intended appeal than Neuwirth suggests.

To examine how the text achieves these functions, the research questions leading this study will involve identifying literary features in the text that address, imply or involve an audience. Analysing how the text positions this audience in relation to the narrator. What position or relation does the text establish between its audience and the characters in the narrative? What knowledge is provided to the audience and what is kept hidden? An investigation into how these micro functions of the text feed into the overall macro functions of aesthetic appeal and ultimately didactic purpose, will be carried out through a close literary analysis in the light of existing literature and research.

## 2. Literature Review

While Muslim exegeses as old as the *Mafāṭīḥ Al-Ghayb* of Rāzi (1990) and the *Al-Tibyān fī Tafṣīr al-Qur'ān* of Ṭūsī (1957) have devoted attention to the literary exposition of the verses of the Qur'ān, a similar level of interest in this field was exhibited in western scholarship until recently. This lack of attention given to the literary features of the Yūsuf narrative runs parallel to the initial lack of scholarship devoted to literary analysis of the Qur'ān in general. Instead, as with the accounts of some of the other prophets in the Qur'ān, the narrative of Yūsuf was often the focus of comparative analysis with the account of Joseph in the Bible – see for instance Finkel (1930) and Berstein (2006).

The other major focus of scholarship in both the Muslim and western world has historically been the interpretation of the narrative within the Islamic historical context in which the story is believed to have been revealed. Contextual background is important in its own right and has been used to great effect by exegetes such as Ibn Kathīr (1998) who explains the verses of the Qur'an in the light of the *ahadīth* and the context of revelation (*shā'n al-nuzūl*) and reasons for revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). However, focus on these aspects has historically resulted in a lack of scholarship treating segments of the Qur'ān such as the narrative in *Sūrah Yūsuf* as complete literary units “possessing significant coherence” (Mir, 1988, p.50) worthy of analysing just for their literary merit. While individual verses in classical Qur'ānic exegeses were subjected to literary scrutiny focusing on aspects such as rhetoric and Arabic grammar, far less attention was granted to analysing whole segments or units extensively and holistically from a literary point of view.

### **Literary analysis of the Qur'ān in history**

Literary analysis of the Qur'ān is by no means unprecedented in Islamic scholarship. The literary aspects of the Qur'ān served as the bedrock of the theological debate in the ninth century on the Qur'an's inimitability or *ij'āz* (Abu-Zayd, 2003). Theological schools like the Mu'tazilites, and Ash'arites invoked the Qur'an's literary merit to act as proof that it was divinely revealed. Analyses of literary features of the Qur'ān, although existent at the time, often stemmed from theological debates between such schools of thought.

Mustansir Mir (1988), one of the first modern proponents of analysing the Qur'ān as a piece of literature in the style of Richard Moulton's *The Literary Study of the Bible* (1899), claimed that traditional writings from the Islamic world on the literary features of the Qur'ān were primarily “works of theology rather than of literary criticism” (Mir, 1988, p.49). Mir is perhaps a little hasty in relegating several classical works analysing the scripture from a literary rather than theological perspective;

works such as Zamakhsharī's *Al-Kashshāf 'an Ḥaqā'iq at-Tanzīl* (1966) and the *tasfīrs* of Al-Ṭūsī and Rāzi mentioned above for instance. However, he correctly identified the need, at the close of the twentieth century for "A systematic literary study of the Qur'an...conducted in accordance with the principles of [modern] literary criticism..." (Mir, 1988, p.50).

Not many works in this vein appeared on the scene until the late twentieth century. Scholarship on *Sūrah Yūsuf* also reflects this trend. Even by the nineteen-eighties, literary analyses of this *sūrah* tended to be included within works that focused mainly on historical or comparative studies. Examples of these include Waldman's "New Approaches to "Biblical" Materials in the Qur'an" (1985) which provides a historical analysis of the narrative of Yūsuf in the Qur'ān and Joseph in the Bible. Although Waldman does devote some attention within this work to literary analysis of character and narrative, this is embedded within his wider historical concerns.

Another example from the same year is Stern's "Muhammad and Joseph: A Study of Koranic Narrative" (1985), in which the author examines the reception of the narrative in the early Muslim community. While such examinations are worthy of merit in their respective historical and comparative fields, they often limited the text to this early audience without considering how it seeks to function for a wider audience. They do not take into account that the Qur'ānic text has been received by many later audiences after the initial community of Muḥammad, and that Islamic theology presents it as applicable to a universal audience till the end of time. It is on this potential of the literary aspects of the text to speak to and preach to a more general implied audience, that this study will focus.

### **Recent scholarship on the subject**

There is now, an ever-increasing trend towards literary study of the Qur'ān which has come to the fore in western academia since the eighties. Amongst the subjects dealt with in this trend have been individual literary features such as characterisation, plot and dialogue (Mir, 1986 & 1992), the role of the speaker or narrator (Bajwa, 2012), formulae (Welch, 2000), semantics (Rouzati, 2013) and structure (El-Awa, 2006, Tzortzis, 2012, & Farrin, 2014) as well as thematic analyses focusing on the text, such as Neuwirth's (2003) treatment of history in the Qur'ān, rather than the Qur'ān in history. *Sūrah Yūsuf* has also received some attention from a literary perspective, particularly by Mir. His essays "The Qur'ānic Story of Joseph: Plot, Themes and Characters" (Mir, 1986) and "Irony in the Qur'an: A Study of the Story of Joseph" (Mir, 2000) briefly cover many of the literary features found in the narrative, and can act as spring-boards for launching further literary analysis of the text.

Analysing textual features like structure and narration have resulted in writers alluding to an audience who must be present to decipher, understand and enjoy these features. For example, Mir's (1986) analysis of narrative style in *Sūrah Yūsuf* is dependent on a reader who is required to respond to the gaps in the story. Angelika Neuwirth (2003) too includes in her essay on Qur'ānic history a brief discussion on the speaker-audience relationship within the Qur'ān in general and particularly in *Sūrah Yūsuf*. However, audience is not the focus for these academics in their investigations of the Qur'ānic text. Thus there remains a gap for studies focused primarily on this on this subject.

### **Implied readership framework and the Qur'ān**

In a recent review of Iser's reader-reception theory, Yanling Shi (2013) outlines that the functioning of a literary work within this framework has two elements; the "response-inviting structures of the text" (Shi, 2013, p.985) which attempt to guide the response of a potential reader in certain directions, and the way that a concrete reader engages with these structures (bringing with them their preconceptions). This outline can be developed to suggest that the first comprises of literary analysis while the latter ventures into hermeneutics.

In relation to the Qur'ān, an aspect of the latter element has been explored by Navid Kermani in his essay "The Aesthetic Reception of the Qur'an as Reflected in Early Muslim History" (Kermani, 2000), in which he presents a collection of responses by listeners of the Qur'ān in the early years of Islam, and later in his book *God is Beautiful: The Aesthetic Experience of the Quran* (Kermani, 2014). The vast corpus of Qur'ānic exegeses and commentaries from the medieval to the modern age, provide a further representation of how diverse audiences over the century have engaged with the text. The former element however, remains to be explored in greater depth.

This overview of current research reveals the need for an in-depth study of the audience-function in the Qur'ān. As a lengthy narrative that tells a story and thus relies overtly on an audience, the narrative of Yūsuf lends itself as a good starting point for such research. Applying the theoretical framework of an implied reader will allow this study to examine how the text functions for audience beyond its first historical recipients.

### 3. Research Methods and Scope

Due to its focus on text, the methods employed in this study are mainly those of textual analysis, with a particular focus on literary features. Intra-textual hermeneutics will be used to examine how these features function within the overall context of the *sūrah*, and at times to examine them comparatively in the light of other parts of the Qurʾān. The study will be conducted largely using data from the primary text (the Qurʾān) but will also be illuminated by material from secondary literature including books, articles, theses, online databases and websites compiling, for example, collections of *ahadīth* (Ahadīth.co.uk, 2016) and commentaries on the Qurʾān, and reference guides (Oxford Reference, 2016) which provide theoretical terminology that can be used to explain the effects of these literary features.

The historical analysis method will be occasionally brought in to demonstrate how the responses that the text appears to invite from an implied audience, can be related to some of the Qurʾān's historical reader or listenership; for instance the Muslim and Jewish communities of Mecca and Medina during the time of Muḥammad. While an implied audience is not tied to any particular historical audience, keeping in mind the religious and theological milieu of the context from which the Qurʾān stems can supplement an appreciation of the type of audience implied in the text (for example a believing audience who is familiar with Islam, and a non-believing audience).

The method of Structural (or Objective) hermeneutics (Titscher et al, 2000) will be employed on selected verses of the *surah* to establish the potential effects and meanings of the literary techniques employed. This method is suited to close readings of small samples of texts due to its rigorous analysis of every potential meaning that a text may imply. This will be particularly useful to unpack verses that invite a multiplicity of interpretations, while ensuring that the text remains the *raison d'être* of a study which examines how the text seeks to affect and influence an implied audience.

Content Analysis (Titscher et al, 2000) of themes will guide the structure of the study. This is a data mining method that can be used to establish the frequency of categories such as themes and values in a text. The method is useful due to its systematic nature which can support a qualitative study with some quantifiable analysis. It is also a beneficial means of broadly grasping the main trends and overall concerns of a text. Within Yūsuf's narrative, themes are related to the messages that the literary techniques seek to convey. Hence thematic analysis based on data mining will be used to structure the discussion, rather than dividing it according to individual literary features of the text, which could result in an extremely piecemeal presentation. A thematic presentation allows one to examine how several literary techniques come together in the text to present a message or series of messages related to over-arching themes.

The scope of the present analysis has been limited firstly to the text of the Qur'ān itself and specifically to one *sūrah*. The main focus of the study will remain the primary text itself and how its literary features function for an implied audience. Instances of how some historical audiences have received the text, will be used to support the responses that the text appears to invite. However, more detailed discussions of related historical and social topics, including how the reception of these historical audiences was influenced by their socio-political or theological backgrounds, is not the focus of this study, nor within its scope. As such, the ensuing discussion does not dwell on matters such as the historical or theological factors that shaped for example, the differences between Sunni, Shī'a and Sūfi exegeses used here as secondary references.

*Sūrah Yūsuf* is used as a sample due to it containing the longest continuous narrative in the scripture, and furthermore a narrative in which the aesthetics of literary features attempt to engage its audience as much as its didactic messages seek to instruct them. Due to these reasons the role of the implied audience becomes particularly significant in this *sūrah*. The intention here is not to construct an audience-reception theory in relation to the Qur'an, but to provide instances of how the text of this *sūrah* invites certain responses from, and conveys messages to, an inclusive and universal audience. The study is therefore exploratory and descriptive in nature rather than prescriptive, which naturally limits its generalizability.

## 4. Analysis, Findings and Discussion

Applying the Content Analysis (Titscher et al, 2000) technique to *Sūrah Yūsuf* mining its textual data using the categories of themes reveals that sight, knowledge, relationships and relations, and authority and authorship are prevalent themes in the narrative. Each of these themes interestingly relates in some way to the implied audience of the text. While sight, relationships and authority are factors governing the characters and their actions, they are also significant in the relationship and position of the audience to the characters, the narrator and the text. A further breakdown of each of these themes provides a useful way of charting what sort of implied audience the text constructs, what effects it seeks to have on them, what responses it seeks to invite, and eventually what messages it attempts to convey by doing all this.

### 4.1. Sight

Sight is one of the most overt themes in the narrative of Yūsuf, with Ya'qūb's blindness and cure as explicit examples of it. Yet the theme also permeates the text far beyond this physical instance. Sight and blindness for an audience of the narrative are indicative of information and events that are presented to the audience to 'see' and information that is withheld from them.

Following a short prologue, the narrative begins with several concise scenes following one another in quick succession. With the exception of verse seven, verses four to fifteen present to the audience a series of dialogues with no intervention from the narrative voice. At times this means that characters are not immediately introduced to the audience, but rather the audience is left to infer their relation to each other. When the older brothers mention "Verily Joseph and his brother are dearer to our father than we are" (The Qur'ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:8)<sup>1</sup> the audience has no knowledge of who this second brother is or why the older siblings are averse to him.

The narrative also begins *in media res*<sup>2</sup> (Oxford Reference, 2016), which plunges the audience into a scene, leaving them to see the characters interacting amongst themselves without a formal introduction from the narrator. The *in media res* technique is utilised again later when the narrative jumps from Yūsuf "...stayed in prison for some years" to "And the King said..." (The Qur'ān, *Yūsuf*,

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<sup>1</sup> All English translations of the Qur'ān are cited from Marmaduke Pickthall's (2000) translation unless stated otherwise

<sup>2</sup> "The Latin phrase meaning 'into the middle of things', applied to the common technique of storytelling by which the narrator begins the story at some exciting point in the middle of the action, thereby gaining the reader's interest before explaining preceding events" (Oxford Reference, 2016)

12:42-3). Not only do we have a succession of scenes following one another, but the transition between them is very abrupt.

This abruptness is enhanced as verse forty-three begins with the conjunction “*wa*”, usually translated in English as ‘and’ or ‘so’. It gives the sense that a conversation was taking place before the scene was opened to the audience and *then* the King started to relate his dream. Most major English translators of the Qur’ān disregard this conjunction, with Shākir (1982) and Pickthall (2000) being the only two who retain it in their translations. By doing so the other translators may be adhering to English grammatical conventions (new sentences or statements do not normally start with a conjunction in English), but their translations miss the enhanced sense of abruptness and the impression of observing something mid-scene that is created by the original Arabic text.

The term ‘scene’ presents itself as an apt description of the narrative style of *Sūrah Yūsuf* at these points. The quick succession of short scenes (enhanced by the use of grammatical features like conjunctions) and the theatrical *in media res* technique culminate in a narrative effect that is not typical of a written or oral narration. Instead of *telling* the story, the *sūrah* at times presents scenes for the audience to observe. The implied audience which the text sets up here is akin to a theatre audience watching a drama unfold. This sense of a drama was also picked up by Ibn Kathīr in his re-telling of the story in the compendium *Qiṣaṣ Al Anbiyā’* (1999) in which phrases to describe the transition between scenes like “this scene dims” and “the scene...closes. Another opens...” (Ibn Kathīr, 1999, p.73) are reminiscent of stage directions in a script. Through this style of narration the text constructs its implied audience as observers of the scenes presented.

From their position of observers the implied audience become witnesses of events and insights which others do not see. In the dialogue where the brothers are conferencing amongst themselves regarding Yūsuf, the Arabic literary technique of “*iltifāt*” (Tzortzis, 2012, p.9) or grammatical shifts is used to change addressees, as the text shifts suddenly from the brothers referring to themselves in the first person pronoun “we” to the second person “you” (The Qur’ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:8-9).

They said: "Truly Joseph and his brother are loved more by our father than we: But we are a goodly body! really our father is obviously wandering (in his mind)!

"Slay ye Joseph or cast him out to some (unknown) land, that so the favour of your father may be given to you alone: (there will be time enough) for you to be righteous after that!" (The Qur’ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:8-9)

This enhances the sense of the brothers plotting and scheming amongst themselves; planning what “we” have been subjected to and what “you” should do. The audience becomes a silent bystander or observer overhearing their multiple scheming voices in the text.

The significance of the audience becoming an observer or witness is indicated by the epilogue of the *sūrah*. “This is of the tidings of the Unseen which We inspire in thee (Muḥammad). Thou wast not present with them when they fixed their plan and they were scheming” (The Qur’ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:102). A reader or listener of the text will not have been physically present at the historical moment in which these events are believed to have occurred. By placing them in the position of an observer however, the text metaphorically allows them to witness the events. The “scheming” is reminiscent of the brothers’ plotting which the audience has had a chance to ‘see’. By consistently placing the audience in a position to see things that other characters within the narrative do not see – for example, the scene where the audience is present with Yūsuf and the minister’s wife alone in a room behind closed doors – the text repeatedly attempts to evoke in them the sense of witnessing sights others have not been granted.

This idea links well with the theological claims that the Qur’ān as a scripture and Islam as a religion make. Followers are required to believe that they have been granted knowledge which previous religions – specifically those of the *Ahl al-Kitāb* or People of the Book (Jews and Christians) – do not provide. Considering that scenes and details such as the conference held by the brothers and the step-by-step narration of the scene between Yūsuf and the governor’s wife are not present (or at least in as much detail) in the Biblical version of the Joseph story, the granting of sights becomes synonymous with the granting of knowledge.

To a Muslim audience the message conveyed here is that they are being granted knowledge which even the People of the Book – with their scriptures full of the histories of the Children of Israel – have not given. It is a message that seeks to strengthen their belief and confirm the supremacy of their faith. It is furthermore, a message which is not presented explicitly through the moralising endings of verses that Neuwirth (2003) refers to, but more subtly through the narrative techniques employed in the *sūrah*, which makes it more entertaining and rewarding for an audience to interpret them than a straightforward sermon would.

The implied audience however, does not necessarily have to be just a Muslim audience. Though Pickthall’s translation makes Muḥammad the most likely addressee of “We inspire in thee (Muhammad)...” (The Qur’ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:102), “Thou wast not present...” is relevant to – and can thus be seen as directed towards – any reader or listener of the Qur’ān, since none will have been present at the historical moments here recited or re-shown. One of its claimed *asbāb al-nuzūl* states that *Sūrah Yūsuf* was revealed in answer to questions posed by the Meccans in consultation with Jewish rabbis of the time, asking Muḥammad to explain how the Children of Israel moved to Egypt (Ibn Kathīr, 1998). The revelation of this *sūrah* is believed to have been an answer to their questions.

*Sūrah al-Kahf* has similar a *sabab* (reason or occasion) for revelation to *Sūrah Yūsuf*, and the two parts of the Qurʾān can be used to illuminate each other in relation to their implied audience and the responses that each encourages from this audience. Meccans posed questions to the Prophet about the two-horned one, the Holy Spirit and the young men of the cave (Ibn Kathīr, 1998). The revealed text of *Sūrah al-Kahf* in response provides meticulous details which have no apparent function within the plot or narrative, but which flaunt knowledge of minutiae that existing versions of these narratives did not provide. This returns the challenge of knowledge made to Muḥammad back to the Jews forcing them to reconsider their pride in their scriptures and knowledge (Khaliq, 2016)<sup>3</sup>.

By presenting itself as allowing its audience to ‘observe’ historical events and details not previously known, the Qurʾānic text in both *sūrahs* presents itself as divine revelation. It is directed towards both a believing and non-believing audience, confirming the former in their faith (and giving them revelatory knowledge with which to defend this faith against challenges) and challenging the disbelief of the latter in a scripture which presents itself as knowledge directly from the Divine, and thus superior to knowledge held in their scriptures.

#### 4.2 Critical observation

The literary techniques in the *sūrah* do not however, only put the audience in a position to observe scenes or events of the narrative, but they also invite critical observation, indicating that knowledge of the truth is not always evident but needs to be deciphered. From its onset the *sūrah* addresses the audience as “the inquiring”: “Verily in Joseph and his brethren are signs...for the inquiring” (The Qurʾān, *Yūsuf*, 12:7). This is a change from the more common form of address in other parts of the Qurʾān where the audience is referred to as believing or *al-Muʾminūn*. The choice of form of address here again can imply both a believing and non-believing audience; unlike *al-Muʾminūn* which when used, makes the address exclusively for believers.

By addressing itself to “the inquiring” the text also invites people to decide for themselves whether they are inquiring folk who can think and observe critically. For the audience it is like a challenge prompting critical self-observation and asking them to see whether they are intelligent enough to interpret the “signs” of God both in this narrative and in the world at large. What the text presents here is a call to religion through people’s thinking faculty; a call addressed to “the inquiring”.

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<sup>3</sup> A detailed discussion of this can be found in my essay “*Human knowledge in relation to God in the narratives of Dhul Qarneyn, Al-Khiḍr and the Seven Sleepers*” (Khaliq, 2016).

Verse seven is the first of many encouragements in the text inviting critical observation and judgement from an audience. Characters presented in the narrative for example, seek to teach the audience that one fares well by employing their critical faculties. The protagonist Yūsuf himself is shown to display the ideal of the critical observer. Pickthall's translation of "*burhāna Rabbihi*" in verse twenty-four (The Qur'ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:24) emphasises the idea of critical thinking: "if it had not been that he saw the argument of his Lord ..." (The Qur'ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:24). Other translators make Yusuf the grammatical object of the verse who is passively shown the "proof" (Yūsuf Alī, 1997) or "evidence" (Shākir, 1982) of his Lord. Pickthall's translation of the Qur'ānic lexis as "argument" (Pickthall, 2000) however, is indicative of a rational action or procedure; giving the sense that Yūsuf actively thought about the signs presented by his lord, considered them logically, and implemented the outcome of this thinking in his actions. It encourages the audience to implement this procedure in their reading of the signs of the lord in this narrative and in their own lives.

Ya'qūb is another example of a critical observer as he refuses to accept the bloodied shirt of Yūsuf as evidence of his death. A shirt is used later used again by the governor's wife to misconstrue information about Yūsuf when she attempts to present it as evidence of guilt. This time the Egyptian man's employment of his critical faculties to judge the case of who is innocent (by whether the shirt is ripped from the front or the back) is a reminder that one must be a critical observer not to be misled by external appearances. As a reoccurring symbol of manipulated empirical evidence embedded in the text, the shirt becomes a theological warning against illusions of the world which may prevent one from seeing clearly. It emphasises to its audience the need to make critical observations and judgements.

After showing the characters as employing their critical faculties, the text then puts the audience in a position to implement the trait of critical observation in their reading of the narrative. In the episode between Yūsuf and the governor's wife this is accomplished through alternating narrative perspectives. Verse twenty-three states "She verily desired him," (The Qur'ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:23) before switching to Yūsuf's perspective to inform "...he would have desired her if it had not been that he saw the argument of his Lord." (The Qur'ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:23) By providing the intentions behind each individual's actions, the narrative offers a psychological insight here different from the outwardly narration presented later in the *sūrah* (see for example, the external narration of Yūsuf's actions in verses seventy to seventy-nine). Without this insight into motives the audience would be in the same position as the gossiping women of the town; reduced to judging the characters based on external appearances.

Having access to their intentions as well as actions however, allows the audience to see Yūsuf as innocent (despite the outside appearances of his ripped shirt) and the governor's wife as guilty (despite the façade of a harassed woman she later tries to adopt). The omniscience provided through the psychological depth of the narrative and the alternating perspectives invites the audience to critically filter the external sights presented to them and not to be misled by external appearances. It also reiterates for its audience the Islamic teaching presented in Muḥammad's *hadīth* number seventy-five in Chapter 1 of the *Sunan An-Nisā'ī*, The Book of Purification which states that actions are based on their accompanying intentions (Ahadith, 2016).

In literary terms this omniscience or granting of knowledge is also displayed in the text through the use of dramatic irony. Dramatic irony is a literary and theatrical technique whereby the audience is granted knowledge of something which the characters do not know (Oxford Reference, 2016). *Sūrah Yūsuf* is rife with irony, so much so that Mustansir Mir (2000) has devoted a whole essay to the subject. Dramatic irony, however is something which Mir unfortunately does not specifically dwell on, despite its great significance in Yūsuf's story in which the audience is often placed in a position of superior knowledge to the characters.

When his brethren come to Yūsuf for provision not knowing that he is their abandoned brother the text states: "And Joseph's brethren came and presented themselves before him, and he knew them but they knew him not" (The Qur'ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:85). By employing the technique of dramatic irony the text grants this knowledge to the audience along with Yūsuf, allowing the audience to see through the deceit of the brothers and unravel their dishonest character. The effect of this technique is that it allows the audience to feel the full force of the brothers' lie and its injustice to Yusuf when they claim "If he stealeth, a brother of his stole before" (The Qur'ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:77), thus aligning their sympathy with the protagonist.

Earlier in the narrative a play on the word "*uṣbah*" (ParaQuran.com, 2006, 12:8) meaning large group, also invites critical engagement from the audience to unravel this deceit and slyness. The brothers first use this term whilst arguing amongst themselves that they should be more preferable in the eyes of their father than Yūsuf and Binyāmīn since they are a large group. Their pride in their own strength and size fuels their enmity towards Yūsuf. Yet later the very idea of a large group is used by them to pose as ideal guardians to protect Yūsuf. In his exegesis, Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī, states that repetition of words in a text leads one to link together the different instances where the word is used (Maybudī, 2015). Here the repeated use of "*uṣbah*" encourages an audience to link it to its initial use and realise how the brothers have manipulated the word to contrive the appearance of a strong group able to protect Yūsuf.

Not only does the text put the implied audience in a position to judge the characters and their actions, but inviting critical judgement through word-play, symbolism and alternating narrative perspectives emphasises that the characters are “signs” for the audience to decipher and learn from. As the text itself states: “Verily in Joseph and his brethren are signs...for the inquiring” (The Qur’ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:12:7). Both a believing and non-believing audience can thus be encouraged to critically and actively decipher these “signs” in the narrative.

The idea of signs is reiterated in “how many a portent is there in the heavens and the earth which they pass by with face averted” (The Qur’ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:12:105), indicating that “signs” for deciphering are also in the world at large. The epilogue in which this verse is to be found suggests that the didactic message of critical observation learnt from the literary features of this narrative is intended to have a wider application in a religious life. Within the narrative of *Yūsuf* it helps the audience to establish the truth or reality behind characters, actions and events. The text indicates that similarly, observing the world critically can help them come closer to the ultimate Truth or Reality; God who in Islam is also described as *Al-Ḥaqq* (the Truth). This is presented through the set of verses detailing the things that people refuse to see or believe in.

This is of the tidings of the Unseen which We inspire in thee (Muhammad). Thou wast not present with them when they fixed their plan and they were scheming.

And though thou try much, most men will not believe.

Thou askest them no fee for it. It is naught else than a reminder unto the peoples.

How many a portent is there in the heavens and the earth which they pass by with face averted!

And most of them believe not in Allah except that they attribute partners (unto Him).

(The Qur’ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:102-6)

There is a gradual movement in these verses from the statement that people will not believe in the history of *Yūsuf* as presented here, to they will not believe in the Qur’ān (which is described here, as elsewhere in the scripture, as “a reminder”), or in the signs of Allāh embedded in nature, or in Allāh Himself. Disbelief in a small part of the scripture escalates to disbelief in God. The bi-dimensionality of the term *ayāh*, which is used in classical Arabic to mean both signs and verses of the Qur’ān, enhances the idea that denying the verses of the Qur’ān is like denying the signs of God that are visible in the world if one, metaphorically speaking, reads between the lines.

The narrative voice on the one hand laments that people – particularly those who do not accept Islam – will not see the argument or signs of their Lord. The placing of numerous verses consecutively detailing all that people refuse to see and believe in emphasises how adamant they are in their disbelief; deliberately turning their faces away from this history, the scripture, the “portents” of God,

and God Himself. At the same time, perhaps to prevent people from simply seeing the content of this *sūrah* as a mere story to address boredom, the text places it within a wider religious context, inviting its audience to apply the ability to observe and judge critically learnt from its literary features, to the world around them to see “signs” pointing to God just as Yusuf saw the “evidence” of his Lord.

The text also questions the audience directly regarding such signs: “...Have they not travelled in the land and seen the nature of the consequence for those who were before them?” (The Qur’ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:109). It is a question echoed repeatedly in the Qur’ān, and often not directed at Muslims. For a believing audience the technique of direct inquisition has the effect of supplementing their belief in the scripture and its message by asking them to bring to bear on their reading of the Qur’ān knowledge and observations from the world around them. For a non-believing audience it is an encouragement to observe this world critically and take warning from those whose consequences are visible in the land.

#### **4.3 Withheld knowledge**

The text so far has presented three forms of knowledge: empirical (which has the potential to be misconstrued by people, or which by itself, can sometimes misrepresent reality), rational (represented here by the action of filtering empirical data through one’s rational faculties) and revelatory (knowledge that is divinely revealed to people and originates from outside of both the individual and the world). While the audience is encouraged to observe, and to observe critically (thus gaining knowledge of the former two types) the latter is shown to be from God only. Hence why, while the audience is in a position where they are shown and told certain things, at other times knowledge is withheld from them. Withholding information in the narrative has both aesthetic effects (it engages and retains the attention of the audience and draws them further into the story), but also forces the audience to realise their dependence on the narrator. This leads to the didactic message that God – who is the narrator for the majority of the surah and thus literally the source of knowledge for its audience – is the ultimate source of knowledge.

An example of the withholding of information can be found in the ambiguity of verses fifty-two and fifty-three. When the King asks the governor’s wife and the other women to explain their situation regarding Yūsuf the dialogue presented is as follows:

He (the king) (then sent for those women and) said: What happened when ye asked an evil act of Joseph? They answered: Allah Blameless! We know no evil of him. Said the wife of the ruler: Now the truth is out. I asked of him an evil act, and he is surely of the truthful.

(Then Joseph said: I asked for) this, that he (my lord) may know that I betrayed him not in secret, and that surely Allah guideth not the snare of the betrayers.

I do not exculpate myself. Lo! the (human) soul enjoineeth unto evil, save that whereon my Lord hath mercy. Lo! my Lord is Forgiving, Merciful. (The Qur'ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:51-3).

The Qur'ānic text itself does not clarify to whom the dialogue in verses fifty-two and fifty-three belongs. Commentators over the centuries have differed in their opinions on this matter. The *Tanwīr al-Miqbās min Tafsīr Ibn 'Abbās* (Ibn 'Abbās & Firūzābād 2008), *Tafsīr al-Jalalayn* (al-Maḥalli & al-Suyūṭī, 2008), and *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* (Ibn Kathīr, 1998), as well as the translations of Sarwar (1973) and Pickthall (2000) attribute the speech to Yūsuf suggesting that Yūsuf asks for a clarification from the women to inform the governor that he did not betray him, and then admits that he does not consider himself to be entirely free of guilt. The *Kashf al-Asrār* of Maybudī (2015), the translation of Yūsuf 'Alī (1999) and the modern interpretation of Farrin (2014) on the other hand, attribute the dialogue to the governor's wife who in fifty-two clarifies to her husband that she did not betray him but in fifty-three confesses that her soul did tempt her.

Applying the method of Objective Hermeneutics as explained by Titscher et al (2000) with its systematic principles and procedures (analysing every aspect of a text in detail and putting it into as many different contexts as possible to come up with all the different interpretations that the text invites), shows that the text itself makes both interpretations possible. Looking at verses fifty-two and fifty-three within their immediate context, with the governor's wife speaking at the end of verse fifty-one, it seems natural for the following verse to be a continuation of her dialogue; particularly since there nothing in the text to indicate a change of speaker. The fact that the King asks Yūsuf to be brought to him in the following verse suggests that Yūsuf is not present during this dialogue, which once again makes it more likely to be a speech by the wife.

The sermonising style of the vocabulary and statements in these verses however, are reminiscent of Yūsuf's style of speech to his two companions in prison. He and Ya'qūb are also the only characters in the narrative (possible due their role as prophets) who directly invoke God. The register and semantics used here is more befitting the speech of a prophet and hence can indicate that it is Yūsuf speaking. The blaming of his own soul can also be a reference to verse twenty-four where Yūsuf is also on the brink of desiring the governor's wife. On the other hand, some like Ibn Kathīr, have taken the references to God to indicate that the governor's wife "had turned to Joseph's religion, monotheism"

(Ibn Kathīr, 1999, p.82), in the light of which, the entire collection of verses becomes her confession and acknowledgment of her guilt.

The semantic make-up of the verses, and their position within the immediate and wider context of the narrative, allows for several interpretations. Objective Hermeneutics requires the interpretations of smaller aspects of the text to be finally amalgamated into a coherent reading. However, even when this is done, two different coherent readings can emerge: Yūsuf clears his character before the governor but acknowledges that he was not completely free of guilt, and reminds everyone that God alone can help people against the beguiling soul. Or, the governor's wife clarifies that despite being tempted by her soul she has committed no sin with Yūsuf to betray her husband, and indicates that she has now acknowledged her sinfulness and the mercy and punishment of God.

The two readings are equally possible and each has been supported by different commentators with no consensus to the present day. The text remains silent regarding who the dialogue belongs to, leaving the audience in the dark and creating a sense of dependence on the narrator (God) – who has here chosen not to provide them with this information or to guide their reading in either direction. It is a reminder of the humble status of man before an Omniscient and Omnipotent deity.

Instances where the audience is not granted knowledge are also evident through the use of narrative technique as the text omits certain information or details while narrating the story. These omissions are particularly evident at the junctures between 'scenes' where no information is provided to show how characters have moved from one place to another. This abrupt narrative style of the Qur'an has long been criticised by some as patchy and inconsistent, with early western scholars of Islamic studies particularly keen on comparing the Qur'anic narrative style to that of the Bible and labelling the former as irregular and intermittent. Such remarks about the Qur'anic style may appear to be valid at first glance when one examines the difference between the narrative style of the Yūsuf story in the Qur'an and the Joseph story in the Old Testament.

The Biblical narrative is a lengthy, detailed chronology charting Joseph's life history. It presents not only the events of his life, but also broader family details like lists of the names of his brothers and later his progeny (The Holy Bible, 1989). The Qur'anic text on the other hand, is not only confined to a few significant events of Yūsuf's life, but narrates even these with brevity. In the transition between verses forty-five and forty-six for example, the King's wine-presser is at one moment speaking to the King (presumably in his palace) and in the very next verse we hear a dialogue directed to Yūsuf, which is presumably from the wine-presser. In the gap between the two verses the audience is left to assume that he has travelled from the palace to the prison, somehow arranged a meeting with Yūsuf and is now asking him to interpret the King's dream. None of this contextual information though is provided

by the text, which eliminates time and space in a narrative that seems intent on providing only the briefest of accounts.

Yet, looking at other parts of the text such as verse sixteen – “And they came weeping to their father in the evening” (The Qur’ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:16)– it becomes clear that the narrative is capable of providing bridges between scenes when it wishes. Examining other parts of this *surah* – the detailed step-by-step narration of Yūsuf and the governor’s wife: “And they raced with one another to the door, and she tore his shirt from behind, and they met her lord and master at the door” (The Qur’ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:24) – and indeed other parts of the Qur’ān such as the examples mentioned earlier from *Sūrah al-Kahf*, it becomes evident that the Qur’ānic narrative style is not always averse to providing minute details. The gaps provided in the scenes mentioned above therefore, are not necessarily the sign of a poor or incompetent narration, but rather serve various functions within the text and particularly for the audience.

At times the text omits information which is not important for the telling of the story. After Yūsuf has revealed himself to his brothers he instructs them to “Go with this shirt of mine and lay it on my father’s face, he will become (again) a seer;” (The Qur’ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:93). There is no mention of the brothers having told Yūsuf about their father’s blindness, since it is unimportant for two reasons. Firstly, the plot has reached its climax by this point. Yūsuf has revealed himself to his brothers and they have shown remorse over their actions. The plot now rushes to its next vital components – the curing of Ya’qūb and the reunion of Yūsuf with his parents – without dwelling on uninteresting details.

Secondly, repeating the fact that Ya’qūb is now blind is not necessary for the audience, who have already witnessed this. This is a strong contrast with the narrative style of the Joseph story in the Book of Genesis where incidents are repeatedly retold. The audience has to read what Joseph told his brothers to do repeatedly as one character tells another (The Holy Bible, Book of Genesis, 1989). because it is important for the characters within the narrative to know. The Qur’ānic style, can seem unrealistic when considered in relation to the world within the story (how would Yūsuf have known to send his shirt to cure Ya’qūb if he was not told about his father’s blindness in the first place), but it keeps the narrative more interesting for an audience who do not need to be told the same thing repeatedly. Its non-repetitive style leaves plot superfluities to the readers’ or listeners’ imagination, and by doing so keeps the narrative lively and engaging. Perhaps more than anywhere else in the *sūrah*, it becomes clear here that the Qur’ānic story of Yūsuf is directed towards, and caters for, an audience. Its style of narration is determined by the needs of this audience and not the demands of the characters’ world.

Leaving gaps in the narrative also encourages greater involvement by the audience as their imagination is required to fill them. As Iser (1972) suggested, a good literary text leaves silences for its implied reader to fill in. Ibn Kathīr acknowledged these gaps in the story centuries ago and labelled them “artistic loopholes” (Ibn Kathir, 1999, p.70). In the *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’* he presents the opening of the narrative as follows: “As the sun appeared over the horizon, bathing the earth in its morning glory, Joseph (pbuh), son of the Prophet Jacob (pbuh) awoke from his sleep, delighted by a pleasant dream he had had. Filled with excitement he ran to his father and related it.” (Ibn Kathīr, 1999, p.70). This information is not taken from other sources that Ibn Kathīr tends to borrow from (such as the Bible or the *Isrā’īlīyāt*), but are instead his own contribution to the narrative. Another reader or listener may easily imagine the opening to be very different. For example: At the dawn of a rainy day, Joseph, son of the Prophet Jacob awoke from his sleep, pondering over a confusing dream he had had. Filled with foreboding he reluctantly approached his father and related it.

The text opens itself up to elaboration and invites this personal engagement from an audience. A re-telling of the story can be made as elaborate or as simplistic as an individual reader or listener wishes to make it. Persian commentators for instance, whose works Annabel Keeler (2009) describes as containing particularly dramatic and lively re-tellings of this narrative, appear to have been affected by the invitation to engage with the story.

The text does not compromise on important facts which are believed to be historical. As engaging and entertaining as it may be, the narrative is after all presented as theological history. However, finer contextual and background details are at times omitted, which can make the story of Yūsuf and its lessons applicable to different historical contexts. In this respect the narrative resembles the genre of a parable, used elsewhere in the Qur’an (such as in *sūrahs* fifteen and sixteen) and also common in other religious and didactic texts. It keeps information about the characters and their background brief and instead focuses mainly on conveying morals. As the most elaborate of Qur’anic narratives, *Sūrah Yūsuf* has both the aesthetic appeal of a lively and detailed story which engages the audience, and the didactic functions of genres like the parable allowing its messages to be easily transferable to the lives of any audience (or non-believing) in any context. The aesthetic appeal draws the attention of the audience, paving the way for a more potent conveying of instructions and religious teachings.

#### 4.4. Relationships and relations

Another way that the text draws the attention of the audience is through the attachment and relation it creates between them and the characters. The audience-character relationship is one amongst the many relationships found in this narrative. When looked at from a moralistic viewpoint, the story of Yūsuf presents a blue-print to the audience of how one should or should not deal with different relations; whether that be with fathers, siblings, masters and their wives, or with God (theologically the most important relationship). What relation or connection the text establishes between the audience and the characters is vital since it determines what messages it can present to its audience through these characters. The story of Yūsuf also consists of two narrative voices, one of them being God who refers to Himself using the first person plural pronoun. As discussed previously, one relation that the text establishes between the audience and this narrator is that of dependence. A further analysis of the audience-narrator relationship and the relationship of God with the characters shows the literary features of the text reiterating for the audience some of the teachings about God and His attributes in Islamic theology.<sup>4</sup>

##### 4.4.1. Fathers and forefathers

Despite being a prophet, Ya'qūb's characterisation in this story is marked primarily by the role of a father. Though he is described as "a lord of knowledge" (The Qur'ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:68) and his patient endurance of grief for his lost son is close to saintly, there are moments in the story where the human, fatherly side of his character is just as significant, if not more so, than his prophetic status. When the brothers are taking Binyāmīn to Yūsuf in Egypt Ya'qūb advises them "...O my sons! Go not in by one gate; go in by different gates. I can naught avail you as against Allah..." (The Qur'ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:67). In the next verse the narrator states:

And when they entered in the manner which their father had enjoined, it would have naught availed them as against Allah; it was but a need of Jacob's soul which he thus satisfied; and lo! he was a lord of knowledge because We had taught him; but most of mankind know not. (The Qur'ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:68)

The advice to enter from different gates appears to be a safety strategy that Ya'qūb equips his sons with. This strategy is said to have provided satisfaction to his soul, even while he knew that it could not divert harm from his sons if Allāh willed it. The attempt to put his heart to rest by putting in place

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<sup>4</sup> Mir (1986) also points out some of the attributes of God, such as the of the All-Knowing, that this narrative highlights. However, there are others important attributes that he does not highlight; such as that of *Wali* which are here discussed.

every safety measure possible, even if realistically it is not a very effective measure, is a very human action to take. It does not weaken Ya'qūb's status as a prophet since he immediately follows the advice with an acknowledgement of God's control. The next verse through the parallelism of "it would have naught availed them as against Allah" (The Qur'ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:68) with Ya'qūb's previous comment phrases "I can naught avail you against Allah" (The Qur'ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:67) also reiterates that he knew the reality of his own limitations against God's power. It does however, give the audience a glimpse into the heartfelt mental turbulence of a father who has lost one son and feels himself to be on the brink of losing another. This constant displaying of the ordinary, human side of Ya'qūb facilitates engagement of the audience with a prophetic character who may otherwise be too distanced from them, and invites heightened admiration for his patience; stressing the Islamic emphasis on patience in adversity.

The stress on Ya'qūb's character as a father also feeds into the context of ancestry that is evoked in the *sūrah* as Yūsuf's forefathers Isaac and Abraham are mentioned several times. Ancestors are significant both within the narrative and also for an audience who may hold religious beliefs learnt from their forefathers that are different to those presented by the Islam. Verse forty can be seen as a message to such an audience: "Those who you worship besides Him are but names which you have named, you and your fathers..." (The Qur'ān, *Yūsuf*, 12: 12:40). Oliver Leaman (2016) writes with regards to this verse:

The reference to fathers brings out that Islam sees itself as the original religion, the *din al-fitra*, but not necessarily the religion acknowledged by more modern ancestors. They might well be a part of the decline in human appreciation of monotheism that led to some of the alternative religions to Islam, and they need to be challenged, as does the natural obedience of their children to their religious views. (Leaman, 2016, p.146).

The "alternative religions" for the Meccan audience of this *sūrah* included the Arab paganism and idolatry in Mecca. For later audiences it can be any number of religions or philosophies that are contrary to Islamic teachings, which they are instructed here not to follow. It may be true as Leaman suggests that the *sūrah* challenges an audience who are following the ways of "more modern ancestors". The encouragement towards critical self-reflection discussed previously is one literary means through which it invites a disbelieving audience to detach themselves from such ancestral beliefs. However, the story of Yūsuf also encourages an inheriting of what is considered to be the true religion; the religion of Yūsuf's forefathers. As always this is done not only by mentioning the forefathers explicitly, but also through subtle literary means.

The audience is alerted from the outset that Yūsuf is to be granted what Ya'qūb and his forefathers were given. The rest of the narrative then displays links between Yūsuf and Ya'qūb which indicate that he truly is the inheritor of both knowledge and the traits of a prophet from his father. We have for

example, Yūsuf exhibiting great patience and endurance in his plot of trials and tribulations similar to the patience shown by Ya'qūb in the parallel sub-plot. At the end of the story Yūsuf's comment to his father "after Satan had made strife between me and my brethren" (The Qur'ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:100) echoes Ya'qūb's allusion to Satan at the beginning of the narrative: "Lo! Satan is for man an open foe" (The Qur'ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:5). The parallel wording suggests that Yūsuf – after a journey of trials and tests in his life – has by the end inherited the wisdom that his father and forefathers had.

This reverting back to what older ancestors believed, is a common theme in the stories of the prophets. In the story of Ṣālih preceding in the chapter before *Sūrah Yūsuf*, people are bewildered at being told to stop worshipping what their immediate fathers worshipped and heed the message that God has re-sent through the prophet of the time ("...Dost thou ask us not to worship what our fathers worshipped? Lo! we verily are in grave doubt concerning that to which thou callest us" (The Qur'ān, *Hūd*, 11:62). Christine Schirrmacher (2008) states that the previous prophets in the Qur'an are presented as proto-types for Muhammad. The common theme of revealed knowledge to a new prophet for his community running through the *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* does encourage the audience to place Muhammad and his followers in a line of successive nations who have been granted knowledge of the true religion by God. Yusūf, whose lineage is praised in a *hadith* quoted by Ibn Kathīr (1998) in his *tafsīr* as the direct descendant of three prophets) – that is Yūsuf, the son of Ya'qūb, the son of Ishāq, the son of Ibrāhīm – is the perfect prophet to emphasise this prophetic lineage brought to its ultimatum in Muḥammad. Through its emphasis on the father-son relationship and the repeated allusions to forefathers, the *sūrah* brings the audience to consider Muḥammad within this wider theo-historical context of prophet-hood.

A similar but more overt attempt is apparent in verse hundred-and-ten where previous messengers are explicitly mentioned. Mentioning previous messengers puts Muḥammad in a line of prophets who, like Yūsuf and Ya'qūb, all had to endure their trials patiently. It also places the new Muslim community of Mecca and generally any individual reading or listening to the Qur'ān, in a line of previous communities to whom messengers were sent, and individuals in whose steps they should follow. By doing so the text attempts to collapse time, presenting itself and its message as universally applicable and as relevant to later audiences as it was to their ancestors.

#### **4.4.2. Audience relationship with Yusuf**

Schirrmacher's comment about other prophets in the Qur'ān as proto-types for Muhammad may be correct to some extent. Analysing the shorter, more formulaic stories of prophets such as Hūd, Ṣālih

and Shua'ib reveals that they all follow the same formula of a prophet sent to preach to a community that was astray, the majority of the community refuse to listen and are punished by God. These stories function as segments of a long history of prophecy and humanity. The Biblical story of Joseph similarly offers one segment of the history of the Children of Israel.

The Qur'ānic story of Yūsuf however, offers a lot more variety than this formulaic narrative. In fact, the only people Yūsuf preaches to are his two companions in prison. Even this relaying of God's message is a private conversation held within the confines of a closed space (the prison) and not a public sermon to a community. Yūsuf's story is more concerned with charting his private journey through life. As with Ya'qūb, Yūsuf's role as a prophet moves to the background as the trials and tribulations of his private life take precedence. Instead of verbal preaching, the messages of Islam are communicated to the audience through his character and actions. The foregrounding of private troubles like sibling rivalry rather than issues related to the public preaching of Islam also makes Yūsuf's narrative more appealing to an audience who may have no knowledge or interest in the theology of Islam, but who can still relate to an engaging story about human tribulations.

The structure of the plot in the first half of the narrative is such that one misfortune follows another in Yūsuf's life. The plot see-saws between trial and relief, followed by another trial and again relief. Yūsuf bears the turns of fortune with patience, as the audience are made to follow the fluctuating plot alongside him. The narrative often prompts the audience to expect a resolution to his trials but then does not offer it. The relief provided when Yūsuf is not initially punished at the governor's wife's accusations for example, is short-lived as he is eventually imprisoned. A short while afterwards there is renewed hope which is once again thwarted: "And he said unto him of the twain who he knew would be released: Mention me in the presence of thy lord. But Satan caused him to forget to mention it to his lord, so he (Joseph) stayed in prison for some years." (The Qur'ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:42) After observing the pattern of trial and relief an audience would be inclined to expect that the wine-presser will be the means of release from prison for Yūsuf. This however, is not granted immediately and the audience, along with Yūsuf, is made to wait patiently for the plot to return to an equilibrium.

This thwarting of expectation is frustrating and the narrative forces the audience to wait patiently for a resolution. The plot of *Sūrah Yūsuf* is a literary implementation of a verse in *sūrah* ninety-four which describes life as series of trials and relief: "After every difficulty there is relief. Certainly, after every difficulty there comes relief" (The Qur'ān, al-Inshirāḥ, 94:5-6)<sup>5</sup>. The text seeks to teach its audience how to deal patiently with such a life, both through the narrative technique and through the use of Yūsuf as a role model. It is worth noting that verse forty-two is one of the very few places in the entire

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<sup>5</sup> Translation by Sarwar (1973)

story where the passage of time is specifically mentioned *and* measured in years – length of time here being important to indicate the extent of Yūsuf’s patience.

The relationship that the text creates between the audience and Yūsuf therefore is one of endearment and empathy at times, and critical distance, but each allows them to learn from him. Besides patient endurance, the other main trait of Yūsuf exhibited in the story is his tendency to ward off evil by placing his trust in God. Through his character the audience is taught the true relation that an individual should have with God. This is indicated by his invocation at the close of the narrative: “...Thou art my Protecting Guardian in the world and the Hereafter. Make me to die muslim (unto Thee), and join me to the righteous.” (The Qur’ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:101)

The descriptors used here to describe Yūsuf and God give an indication of the relation between them. God is described as *Walī*, one of the ninety-nine attributes of God in Islam which in Arabic has various shades of meaning including Protector, Guardian, Supporter and Helper. The attribute of Protecting Guardian which is repeated several times is a prominent trait of God in this narrative, while Yūsuf wishes himself to be a Muslim; one who submits to the will of God. This describes the ideal relationship in Islam between God and man; with man putting his trust in God (submitting to him) and God protecting and guiding him through the trials of life. Yūsuf’s story exhibits this relationship.

The relationship is significant on the level of plot as Yūsuf, who is out of the reach of his parents’ protection, is protected by God at every step. It is also evident at the grammatical level. During the scene where Yūsuf tries to defend himself from the governor’s wife’s approaches, his first response to her is: “He said: I seek refuge in Allah!” (The Qur’ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:23). The very next verse states: “...Thus did We protect him from evil and indecency. He was certainly one of Our sincere servants.” (The Qur’ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:23)<sup>6</sup>. In this verse the Narrator (God) is an active agent as the pronoun “We” is in the nominative, while Yūsuf is the passive object (“him” being in the accusative tense). It is as if the refuge he sought in the previous verse is granted as God becomes a Protector actively protecting him.

Interference of the Divine in an ordinary human life is also reflected through the intrusion of miracles (the blindness of Ya’qūb and the ability of Yūsuf’s shirt to cure him) into a narrative which otherwise conforms to the literary genre of social realism. The realism created by a story which is about ordinary human emotions and misfortunes, set in a detailed and realistic society (complete with gossiping women of the town), makes the experience of watching the protagonist move through a fully-fledged society richer and more engaging for the audience. It also makes the intrusion of the miraculous even

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<sup>6</sup> Translation by Sarwar (1973)

more dramatic and startling when it comes. It is a startling reminder to the audience about an Omnipresent deity and His power to interfere in ordinary human life.

#### **4.4.3. The Narrator and the audience**

God's interference and his attribute of *Walī* is also significant for the audience. As a narrator He intervenes in the story to address the audience directly, draw out lessons and maxims; guiding them through the text as He is shown to intervene in Yūsuf's life and guide him. A parallel can be drawn for example, between God's direct communication and intervention in Yūsuf's life – "We inspired in him: Thou wilt tell them of this deed of theirs when they know (thee) not" (The Qur'ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:15) – and the several times that He intervenes in the narrative to guide or warn the audience. This creates a meta-narrative – alongside the narrative of Yūsuf and the characters – where the Narrator speaks directly to the audience.

Anjelika Neuwirth (2003) also acknowledges this meta-narrative, which she feels is created by the endings of many verses in the Qur'an in general and this *surah* in particular, which move from narrating the story of Yusuf to addressing the audience. While in Arabic this would come under the label of *iltifāt*, Neuwirth calls the technique *cadenza* (Neuwirth, 2003, p.12), likening it to the sound of a Gregorian chant moving from a low note to end on a higher note. While particularly pertinent to an oral recitation of the Qur'an and its listeners, the technique she describes is also visible for readers structurally as the verses move from a particular statement about the characters or their world, to a general maxim. It creates, as she suggests, a meta-narrative for discourse from the Narrator to the audience. The existence of a meta-narrative alongside the narrative shows God to be simultaneously within the world of Yūsuf and the characters while remaining outside it. It implements in literary terms the Muslim belief that God is both immanent and transcendent, telling the audience that God also has the power to interfere in their lives.

#### **4.5. Agency, authority and authorship**

God's interference in the plot and Yūsuf's characterisation as a passive agent point to an interesting power dynamic in the *surah*. The interference of God as Protector in the plot and Narrator in the narrative establishes Him as the ultimate authority in Yūsuf's life and the story. There are however, also attempts by other characters within the narrative, to exercise control over Yūsuf.

In first half in particular we see other people determining what happens to Yūsuf. The brothers take him away from their father and cause him to be sent to a distant land. He is then dependent for his livelihood on the governor who purchases him. The guiles of the governor's wife and other women, and the decisions taken by others land him in prison. There is very little dialogue granted to Yūsuf in this part of the story, which is reflective of the lack of control – the lack of a voice – that he has at this point. The audience sees and hears others deciding his fate.

Raymond Farrin's (2014) structural analysis of the *sūrah* using the framework of concentric structures exquisitely reveals the dynamics of power and control between the various characters within the story. In his outline of the structure of verses eight to nineteen he highlights how the verse mentioning Yūsuf is hemmed in from both sides with verses detailing the brothers' scheme to leave him stranded in a pit. The structure complements the content of the narrative; Yūsuf is trapped by his brothers' scheming. Although Farrin does not do so, this structure can be further developed to show that on either side of the brothers' scheming are verses mentioning Ya'qūb's knowledge. What we get is a structural diagram of Yūsuf being trapped in the snares of the brothers' plot, while they and their scheming personalities are encapsulated within Ya'qūb's knowledge. Similarly, when the governor's wife seeks to ensnare Yūsuf, and verses twenty-eight and twenty-nine which show Yūsuf's innocence are trapped between the verses detailing her actions (twenty-five to twenty-seven on one side and thirty to thirty-two on the other). This structural analysis of smaller parts can also be applied to the *sūrah* overall with the outcome that all the characters and their respective plots and schemes are ultimately encapsulated by the prologue and epilogue in which God communicates as Narrator.

Prologues and epilogues are a convention of much of the literature of the medieval period. Literary cultures as far away from Arabia as the Anglo-Saxon world used these to anchor a story or narrative to the messages that the narrator or author wanted to convey to the audience. On a structural level they represent the author or narrator's ability to guide the implied audience towards a certain reading of the text. In the prologue and epilogue of *sūrah* 12 there are several lessons or morals presented to the audience as discussed previously, but even their general presence as book-ends to Farrin's concentric structural analysis is a reminder to the audience that God is in ultimate control as His power and knowledge encapsulates the characters within the narrative, their lives and the indeed world in general.

Another potent reminder of God's authority comes in the form of a revelation in verse 77: "Thus did We contrive for Joseph. He could not have taken his brother according to the king's law unless Allah willed. We raise by grades (of mercy) whom We will...." (The Qur'ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:77). Maybudī, while also referencing Ibn 'Aṭā' as holding the same view, interprets this verse to be referring to the trials

that God contrives for Yūsuf, following which he acquires the station of “generosity and elevation” (Maybudī, 2015, p.256-7). In the light of the second sentence however, another appropriate interpretation seems to be that God contrived the plan that allowed Yūsuf to take his brother despite the laws of the land.

God’s contriving of this plan is mentioned at the outcome of the plan and not when Yūsuf is first putting it into action. Keeping this insight hidden from the audience keeps them at first under the impression that Yūsuf is now completely in control of his life and those around him. We see him instructing his brothers to bring Binyāmīn to him and instructing those working under him to put the brothers’ money back in their saddles, or the King’s cup into Binyāmīn’s bag. There are no insights into Yūsuf’s thoughts or motives during this part of the narrative as there are previously in the *sūrah*, and instead his character is presented externally as he controls those around him. The reason for this lack of insight becomes clear when verse seventy-seven reveals that it was God who contrived for him. According to this Yūsuf is like a puppet who hitherto has been putting God’s plan into practice. The lack of psychological insight becomes a part of the characterisation of Yūsuf as a passive medium through whom God is putting His plot into action.

These reminders encourage the audience not to assign complete control to the characters, or alternatively to fate, and to acknowledge that control is in the hand of the Narrator or Author of the story. In a fictional text intervention from the narrator prevents the audience from becoming too engrossed in the internal world of the characters – from thinking about them as independent entities – and encourages them to view the characters as constructs created and controlled by the author. While the context of this story is different – it is presented as a history of real individuals – the structural and narrative techniques still draw the audience’s attention to the authority of the Narrator in a similar way. The authority of God in this *sūrah* is an indication of His authorship. He is not only presented as the author of the story of Yūsuf, and the life events of the real historical Yūsuf, but the conventional shifting from particular to general in “Thus did We contrive for Joseph...We raise by grades (of mercy) whom We will” (The Qur’ān, *Yūsuf*, 12:77) indicates to the audience that His authority and authorship also extends into other real lives like their own.

## 5. Conclusion

*Sūrah* twelve, like other parts of the Qur'ān, and indeed like other religious scriptures is didactic; it seeks to teach and to preach to its audience. What sets it apart from other parts of the scripture though, is that it reaches this didactic goal through a particularly literary and aesthetic route. Before the moralistic ending of the epilogue therefore, is the reminder of God as the author of the plot; rather like the signature of the artist at the end of his work of art.

Like any piece of art the narrative presented in *sūrah* twelve also attempts to engage and affect its audience. Hence amongst other effects and responses, it invites empathy for the protagonist, and moves one to the point of frustration through the unfolding of its plot. It alternately involves the audience and reminds them of their limits and dependence on the author through gaps in its narration and information it does and does not convey. Through its textual structure it seeks to humble them by emphasising God's control and authority.

Such effects and the responses they seek to invite, also feed into the higher goal of instructing the audience. This instruction is theological and philosophical in nature. While *sūrah* twelve has an argument of its own to present – with messages about patience, knowledge, relationships and critical observation – it also demonstrates doctrines from other parts of the Qur'an and other Islamic texts like the *ahadīth*; God is both immanent and transcendent, He is The Truth and a Protecting Guardian, revelatory knowledge is superior to empirical knowledge which can be misconstrued, and actions are based on intentions. Instruction is provided to the audience on various branches of theological philosophy like metaphysics, epistemology and ethics through a narrative which, on the surface, is about personal trials and ordinary everyday relations.

The personal struggles and the consolation they provide are by no means an insignificant aspect of the *sūrah*, not least for its first actual audience; Muhammad and his early Muslim community. While the focus of this study was the implied audience, it can be seen that some of the responses that the text seeks to elicit map well onto the actual audience of early Islam to whom the text is believed to have been revealed. This opens up further avenues for potential research. The study presented here focused on drawing out the signs and techniques present within the text for a potential audience. This of course, is only one half of the argument in the reader-response theory of literary scholars like Iser. The text attempts to guide the audience, but the audience also brings its contextual background which affect how and to what extent they are guided. There is much scope therefore, for conducting further studies on how actual audiences from different backgrounds (both historical and cultural) have been moved, affected and instructed by these techniques.

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