

THE QUR'ANIC STORY OF JOSEPH AS A 'HISTORY' OF THE HUMAN

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INTRODUCTION

The point of departure in this article will be the classical principle which says that some parts of the Qur'an explain other parts of the Qur'an (*al-Qur'an yufassiru ba'duhū ba'dān*).¹ My basic assumption is that, as a self-contained text, the Qur'an not only suggests that we see its verses in light of other verses and passages, but it *demand*s that we do so. And, if this applies to the use of words and phrases, then the same holds true for clusters of key Qur'anic ideas, concepts and themes.

I will here be concerned with relating this abovementioned intertextual principle to two sections of the Qur'an, namely the story of Joseph (12:3-101) and parts of *Sūrat al-Tūn*, 'The Fig' (95:4-6). More specifically, an attempt will be made to demonstrate that the Qur'anic story of Joseph serves as a perfect 'commentary' upon the relevant verses of *Sūrat al-Tūn*, with respect to both structure and meaning. But to see the story of Joseph in this light, one must assume a symbolic perspective as opposed to the more literary and dramatic approaches that are commonly applied to the story, and often with considerable insight and interest.² My approach to the story of Joseph is thus informed by and somewhat akin to the more 'esoteric' interpretations it has traditionally received in texts of Sufism and Islamic philosophy.³

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This article has benefited from the critical comments of a number of colleagues. Particular thanks go to Waleed Ahmed, Yousef Casewit, William Chittick, Aasim Hasany, Hany Ibrahim and Todd Lawson.

¹ For a general treatment of this principle, see Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an* (London: IB Tauris, 1999), ch. 12.

² See, in particular, Anthony Johns, 'Joseph in the Qur'an: Dramatic Dialogue, Human Emotion and Prophetic Wisdom', *Islamochristiana*, Vol. 7, 1981, pp. 29-55; Todd Lawson, 'Typological Figuration and the Meaning of "Spiritual": The Qur'anic Story of Joseph', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 132, No. 2, 2012, pp. 221-244; Mustansir Mir, 'Irony in the Qur'an: A Study of the Story of Joseph', in *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an*, edited by Issa Boullata (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000), pp. 173-187; Mir, 'The Qur'anic Story of Joseph: Plot, Themes, and Characters', *The Muslim World*, Vol. 76, No. 1, 1986, pp. 1-15; James Morris, 'Dramatizing the Sura of Joseph: An Introduction to the Islamic Humanities', *Journal of Turkish Studies*, Vol. 18, 1994, pp. 201-224.

³ Some representative materials and pertinent secondary scholarship can be found in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. 'Joseph i: In Persian Literature' (by Asghar Dadbach) and *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. 'Joseph ii: In Qur'anic Exegesis' (by Annabel Keeler). One may also consult Paul Nwyia, 'Un cas d'échec soufi: l'Histoire de Joseph', in *Mélanges offerts à Henry Corbin*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Tehran: McGill University, Institute of Islamic Studies, Tehran Branch, 1977), pp. 407-423 and my commentary upon *Sūra* 12 in *The Study Quran* (for which, see the following note).

SOME PREPARATORY REMARKS

Qur'an 95:4-6 reads as follows: 'Truly We created man in the most beautiful stature [95:4], then We cast him to the lowest of the low [95:5], save those who believe and perform righteous deeds; for theirs shall be a reward unceasing' (95:6).⁴ A common explanation of 95:4 is that human beings were created in the image of God, in accordance with the Prophetic saying, 'God created Adam in His form'.⁵ And 95:5 can be interpreted as the general state of disbelief from which only those mentioned in 95:6 are excluded.⁶

According to the great philosopher-mystic Šadr al-Dīn al-Qunawī (d. 1274), another way to understand 95:4-6 is that, as the self, created in the divine image, enters the downward flow of the cycle of existence, it becomes trapped in it (i.e., the 'lowest of the low'). Yet, only a few are able to escape this trap, thereby ascending the circle of existence and returning to their original state in the divine image.⁷ It is this more metaphysical reading of 95:4-6 with which we will be working.

Taking the story of Joseph's different characters as so many symbols of the self, we will see how this tale presents us with a vivid 'history' of the human soul, from its origin to its fall, and then its return to its source. However, we are not here taken through the life of just any human soul; rather, the 'history' in question is concerned with that soul which has attained perfection. This is precisely the journey of the soul that is recounted in 95:4-6. The story of Joseph is, therefore, a symbolic representation and dramatization of 95:4-6.⁸

THE STORY OF JOSEPH

The story of Joseph in Qur'an 12:3-101 corresponds to Genesis 37:1-46:7, but with a number of important differences.⁹ The Qur'anic account can be summarized as follows.

Joseph (who will soon become a prophet) discloses a special dream he had to his father, the prophet Jacob, wherein 11 stars, the sun and the moon prostrate before him (12:4). Jacob understands the dream to indicate Joseph's being

⁴ Translations from the Qur'an are taken from *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner Dagli, Maria Dakake, Joseph Lumbard and Mohammed Rustom (New York: HarperOne, 2015).

⁵ This tradition is found in the standard sources. See, for example, Muhammad b. Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *al-Sahīh* (N.p.: Maṭba'at al-Shu'ab, 1958-1959), Isṭiḥḥān 1.

⁶ These points are taken from Joseph Lumbard's commentary upon 95:4-6 in *The Study Quran*. See the text translated in William Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought*, edited by Mohammed Rustom, Atif Khalil and Kazuyo Murata (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), pp. 128-129.

⁷ This should not come as a surprise, since these verses from *Sūra* 95 are themselves informed by the wider Qur'anic worldview concerning the origin, fall, and return of human beings in general.

⁹ It can be noted here that Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an*, chap. 11, contains a useful comparative study of the Qur'anic and Biblical accounts of the story of Joseph.

chosen by God (12:5). He then admonishes his son not to convey his dream to his other brothers (12:6), who are exceedingly jealous of him (12:8). Meanwhile, the brothers plot to be rid of Joseph and convince Jacob to allow Joseph to go with them on a leisurely outing (12:9-14). Once in their care, Joseph is cast by them into a well (12:15). The brothers return to Jacob, presenting him with a concocted story of Joseph's death and also bringing forth some false evidence to corroborate their account; but Jacob does not believe them (12:16-18). Joseph is eventually rescued by a caravan (12:19) and purchased by a high-ranking Egyptian viceroy (12:21).

While Joseph is under the viceroy's care, the viceroy's wife falls in love with him and attempts to seduce him, but Joseph does not succumb to her advances (12:23-25). After false accusations before the viceroy (12:25) and Joseph's self-defence (12:26), it becomes clear that Joseph was innocent (12:27-28). Yet, amid widespread rumours amongst the women of Egypt concerning what had transpired between Joseph and the viceroy's wife (12:30) and her confronting the women (12:31-32), Joseph is put into prison (12:35). In prison, Joseph's virtues are recognized amongst his prison mates, and they thus seek his interpretation of their dreams (12:36). Joseph obliges (12:37, 41), and this incident eventually serves as a catalyst for his being exonerated, released from prison, and appointed to high office in Egyptian society (12:43-56).

In the face of a major agrarian crisis, Joseph's brothers come to Egypt, seeking provisions, all the while unaware that the person in charge of the food rations is none other than Joseph, who recognizes them but is not recognized by them (12:58). This encounter with his brothers allows Joseph to put into place an ingenious plan (12:59-82) whereby Jacob is informed of Joseph's whereabouts (12:83-86). After Jacob sends the brothers back to Egypt (12:87), Joseph confronts them (12:88-90). The brothers acknowledge their wrongdoing against him (12:91), and Joseph forgives them (12:92). Joseph then invites his whole family to come to stay with him (12:93). After his parents enter Egypt (12:99) and he honours them, Joseph's parents and his brothers all prostrate themselves before him, thereby fulfilling the dream which he had at the beginning of the story (12:100). With the basic picture of 95:4-6 and the story of Joseph in place, we shall now turn to our symbolic reading of the tale.

A SYMBOLIC READING

Joseph represents the *human self* or *the soul* in its terrestrial or fallen state, which is a natural and necessary aspect of the life of any human being. What the 'self' is in Islamic thought would itself require a lengthy inquiry. Suffice it to say here that by 'self' I simply mean what we normally identify in Islamic texts as the human being as such, namely the inward nature of a person. We can also refer to the self (or, more commonly, aspects of the self) as the spirit (*ruh*) or heart (*qalb*). But, these two terms need to be situated against the backdrop of a number of complex cosmological and metaphysical doctrines.¹⁰ Thus, for

purposes of clarity and consistency, we will only employ the terms 'self' and 'soul' here with reference to the human being in all of its states.

As a symbol of the human soul, Joseph first discloses his dream to his father Jacob (12:4). As will become clear in due course, we can understand Jacob's function in the story here as corresponding to human intelligence, namely a person's ability to discern the nature of things on a deep and essential level (as opposed to the more general quality of ratiocination or cognition). We shall return to the meaning of Joseph's dream once its actualization comes about at the end of the story. But for the meantime, it should be noted that the skill Joseph will eventually learn is *ta'wil*, namely the ability to interpret dreams or what the Qur'an calls 'the interpretation of events' (12:6). *Ta'wil* indeed refers to the process of interpretation, but it literally denotes the idea of taking something back to its origin. Thus, *ta'wil* in Islamic sources is often understood to refer to esoteric scriptural exegesis; that is, the uncovering of the original and inner dimension of the outward form of the Qur'an. By extension, it is seen as the ability to return to the original meaning of any event or circumstance. Applied to the human being, *ta'wil* refers to the ability to grasp the original nature of the self, or what we would more generally call 'the science of the soul'. Therefore, Jacob's words to Joseph in 12:6, 'Thus shall thy Lord choose thee, and teach thee the interpretation of events, and complete His Blessing upon thee', tell us that Joseph will eventually learn the science of the soul, and this acquired knowledge will clearly be a result of God's having chosen him.

Since Jacob symbolizes intelligence or discernment, he is already aware of the meaning of Joseph's dream. But the fallen aspect of the human being is unaware of this science insofar as it is a fallen being; it thus must go through the process of recovery in order for it to come to know what it has always known, but which has become obscured on account of the fall from Heaven. How we know that the story's beginning implies some notion of the fall of the human being is that both discernment (Jacob) and the soul (Joseph) are conceived as two separate entities. The more coalesced they are, the more the seemingly disparate aspects of the human being are integrated. And the more integrated the human soul, the closer he is to his original nature, namely the divine image in which he was created.

Jacob tells Joseph that his vision should not be disclosed to his brothers, 'lest they devise some scheme against thee' (12:5). The brothers here represent the lower aspects of the soul in general; that is, the negative tendencies within the human being – normally referred to in Sufi texts as the *nafs* or ego, which is the sum total of the negative states of the soul. By protecting the vision from his brothers, Jacob, or human discernment, reflects the awareness that one should not squander the possibility for realization (symbolized by the vision) by giving in to the lower possibilities of the self, namely the ego.

There is a clear tension between human intelligence and the ego, as seen in

¹⁰ For the spirit and heart, see Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender*

12:8. Hence, the desire on the part of the brothers to be rid of Joseph so that 'your father's concern might be for you. And be, thereafter, a righteous people' (12:9) can be read as the false promise that the human being *qua nafs* gives to itself that it will come under the purview of the intelligence and live a righteous life once the *nafs* reigns supreme and is fully satiated. Jacob or the intelligence is all too aware of the trickery of the *nafs*, and thus is rightfully suspicious of it (12:11). The main reason Jacob gives to the brothers for not sending Joseph along with them to, as they state, 'frolic and play' (12:12), is that 'the wolf may eat him, while you are heedless of him' (12:13). As something that devours what stands in its path, the wolf represents the world as such, or the *dunyā*. In other words, if the soul is in a state of being 'heedless' (12:13) of its true nature (symbolized by the brothers' taking charge of Joseph), this worldly life will devour it, leaving it in ruin.

We now turn to a key symbol in the Qur'anic account of the story of Joseph, figuring as it does three times in the story. The symbol here is of course Joseph's shirt (*gamīṣ*). As Todd Lawson notes, Joseph's shirt itself functions as a key 'character', standing as 'a symbol or emblem of the passage of time and narrative development and by association all narrative continuity'.¹¹ Thus, in each instance in which Joseph's shirt appears, we are encountering the same shirt, but in three different guises. The first time we encounter Joseph's shirt is in 12:18, where the brothers 'brought forth his shirt with false blood'. The shirt here represents the soul's purity, which the soul 'wears' or carries until it is torn away from it by the brothers (the *nafs*). Without its protective garment of purity, the brothers or the *nafs* throw Joseph or the human soul 'in the depths of the well' (12:15), which clearly symbolizes the spiritual ailments. In the bottom of the well the soul is now in the lowest of its possible states, precisely 'the lowest of the low' mentioned in 95:4. Then, with the stain of falsehood (symbolized by the blood which the brothers – the *nafs* – placed upon the shirt in 12:18), the shirt in its sullied state is presented to the intelligence (Jacob) as normal.

With the human plunged in spiritual infirmities, the ego is victorious. Yet human intelligence will not accept the defeat of the self by the ego (12:18). The soul then rises from this lowest of all possible states and is saved by the people of the caravan, who 'valued him not' (12:20). The reason they did not value Joseph (the soul) is because, in the symbolism with which we are concerned, they represent time, which has no 'need' of the soul as such since time is indifferent to what takes place within it. Thus, over a period of being trapped in the well or one's spiritual ailments, the soul gradually awakens to its lowly state and begins to resurface, seeking to purify itself and escape the trap in which it has been placed by the ego.

12:22 speaks of Joseph as attaining 'full maturity' and being granted 'wisdom and knowledge' by God at that time. In 12:21 we are told that Joseph is purchased by 'the man from Egypt' (12:21), who is also referred to as the viceroys ('*azīz*') (12:30, 51). He is identified in Qur'anic exegetical literature

with Potiphar in the Biblical account of the story of Joseph. Potiphar clearly sees in Joseph something that others do not see, and that is why he can represent insight (*baṣīra*). In 12:22, Potiphar tells his wife, known in the Islamic tradition as Zulaikha and commonly identified in Sufi sources with 'the soul that incites to evil' (*al-nafs al-ammāra bi'l-sū'*) (derived from 12:53), that she should give Joseph 'honourable accommodation'. As we shall see, Zulaikha also represents the lower self, but more specifically the passions. And, as is the case with Joseph's shirt, she appears in three different guises in the story, and her lowly nature is eventually transmuted into a higher form of love shorn of sensual passion. If Potiphar symbolizes insight and Zulaikha the passions, then his statement to her can be seen as a judgement by the soul, in its newly realized state of maturity, that it can indeed partake in sensory pleasure, but of course within certain limits and always under the purview of knowledge and good judgement. That is to say, as the soul seeks to transmute its base qualities in order to obtain the primordial purity with which it came into the world, it can partake in sensory pleasure within good measure, and which could in fact aid it on its journey back home.

Yet there is always the possibility that excessive indulgence in the passions will throw one's focus off kilter, and cause the soul to descend into deeper and darker states. This is to be kept in mind as we encounter the incident between Joseph and Zulaikha in 12:23–25. Joseph at this stage in the story represents the soul on its journey back home, and it has already undergone a considerable amount of spiritual preparation and transformation. Yet, this soul still struggles with the passions, even if they are legitimate on one level. Zulaikha, as the excessively passionate element of the soul, thus possesses a certain kind of stranglehold on the soul. A weaker soul will, in other words, give in to the passions and thus cease to develop spiritually, but a soul that is stronger, one that has been given knowledge and wisdom by God on account of its spiritual maturity, will surely be better equipped to deal with the passions when confronted by them. This is why 12:24 states that Zulaikha 'indeed inclined towards him, and he would have inclined towards her had he not seen the proof of his Lord'.

Now we re-encounter that all-important 'character', namely Joseph's shirt. At this stage in the story, Joseph's shirt is again torn from him, but this time by Zulaikha or the passions specifically (12:25–29). The struggle that ensues between Joseph and Zulaikha represents, in the first instance, the struggle of the soul to overcome the passions, and to consequently strive in the truth and transcend the false self. By the time Joseph flees from Zulaikha, the soul has made considerable progress in overcoming the passions, even though it is pursued by them with great fervour (note that the shirt, here symbolizing the earlier stages of the soul's actualization of the spiritual virtues, was torn from the back (12:28), which alludes to the negative forces of the passions as they attempt to chase the soul and hold it back from making further spiritual progress).

It should be noted here that there seems to be a sense in which Potiphar, who

¹¹ Lawson, 'Typological Figuration and the Meaning of "Spiritual"', p. 235.

represents insight, is related to Jacob or intelligence. Firstly, insight is a lesser function of intelligence. Secondly, when Potiphar first sees Joseph, he refers to a possible parental relationship that may result by virtue of his taking Joseph into his household (12:21). Thirdly, just as Jacob will later go blind and have his sight restored by virtue of Joseph's shirt (see below), so too does Potiphar go blind and have his sight restored by virtue of Joseph's shirt. This later point alludes to 12:28, where, after seeing that Joseph's shirt was torn from the back (thus clearly indicating that Zulaykhā was guilty of attempting to seduce Joseph), Potiphar comes to accept Joseph's innocence. In other words, the battle of the soul with the lower passions can momentarily obscure one's spiritual insight so that matters are not seen as clearly as they were before the onslaught of the passions upon the soul (as is the case here). But when the soul breaks away from the passions – literally running away from them (12:25) – and is able to objectively observe their potential harm upon it (symbolized by the torn shirt), its insight is no longer obscured, and it can therefore again 'see' clearly. This explains why, at this point, Potiphar tells Joseph to 'turn away from this' (12:29).

The women of Egypt who were rumour-mongering with respect to Joseph and Zulaykhā (12:30–31) also represent the soul's inner struggle with the passions, even after it has overcome the passions on one level. At 12:31 the women are clearly mesmerized by Joseph's astounding beauty, which can be understood as the soul's ultimately seeing its primordial beauty, and thereby moving away from the passions and completely inward – that is, away from the world and into the sanctuary of divine remembrance and inwardness. This is why at 12:33 Joseph says that prison, here symbolized by the turn inward, is more beloved to him than that to which the women call him.

It can also be noted that at 12:32, unlike the first time when she was caught chasing Joseph, Zulaykhā admits her wrongdoing. But she also insists that his failure to comply with her wishes will result in his being imprisoned. Normally, this is understood to be a threat – if Joseph does not sleep with her, Zulaykhā will punish him by placing him in prison. But, reading the different characters in the story as different aspects of the self, Zulaykhā first represents the passionate aspect of the human self, as we have already seen. Then, in 12:32, she represents that passionate aspect of the self now somewhat transmuted and integrated into the higher aspects of the soul, such that the human self comes to recognize that if it does not give in to the lower passions, it will enter into prison, which, as we have noted, in this story represents the turn to the inward life.

In prison, Joseph encounters some prisoners and helps interpret their dreams for them (12:36–42). In other words, as the soul turns inward, into 'prison', it will naturally encounter others on the spiritual journey who require advice in their own lives and journeys. This meeting with the prison mates eventually leads Joseph to meet the king of Egypt, who releases him and makes him viceroy of Egypt (see 12:43–50, 54–55), which was the very same function of Potiphar (see, in particular, 12:78 and 88). This 'freedom' of the soul is thus a

direct result of the time it has spent in spiritual retreat, thereby being called by the king or inward voice (the *ḥaṭif* in Sufi literature) to return to society in order to benefit others, and to perfect the soul completely. As viceroy, the soul thus has the freedom to oversee its own spiritual affairs (see Joseph's request to the king at 12:55), and has the ability to act righteously and to now look back to its original, pristine state of purity.

At 12:51, the king confronts the women, at which point Zulaykhā admits that Joseph was innocent. Although she had earlier admitted to her wrongdoing, at this stage she simply accepts her actions and does not attempt to exonerate herself or threaten or blame Joseph in any way. That is, Zulaykhā at this stage symbolizes the passions now completely transmuted into pure, detached love, fully integrated as they are into the higher aspects of the self. Now, just as Zulaykhā represents the ascending realization of the lower aspect of the soul into the higher aspect of the soul, so too do Joseph's brothers, through their long exchange (12:59–82), come to symbolize the process of the death of the ego.

At 12:84–85 we are told that, on account of his grief over his beloved Joseph, Jacob's 'eyes had turned white'. Since it has already been established that Jacob symbolizes the intelligence, how is it that it can become blind on account of Joseph (the soul)? This is because, without the science of virtues, one's intelligence amounts to nothing. The blindness of the intelligence can only be cured when it works together with the soul, which is to say, when knowledge and virtue, or intelligence and will, are brought into harmony with one another. The practical, lived aspect of the spiritual life here becomes a key piece to the puzzle: the soul cannot actualize its true intellectual potential unless it is perfected, at which point the clouds that cover the light of intelligence will quickly vanish away, and the light of intelligence will shine forth.

The soul that is perfectly characterized by the virtues is one in which the ego is completely slain, such that there is no personal ambition on the part of the individual, and all things are done for the sake of God. Joseph's confronting the brothers at 12:89–92 thus symbolizes the final transmutation of the soul, whereby its lower or negative tendencies are overcome, and the other aspects of the lower self are also integrated into its higher aspects such that they partake in the natural rhythm of the life of the soul. This is best seen in, for example, the integration of the body on a positive level into the substance of the soul such that the body itself becomes sanctified, and is no longer a lowly substance in and of itself. With the lower self thus conquered, the soul is able to rise to 'the most beautiful stature' (95:4) in which it had originally been created.

The third and final instance in which Joseph's shirt figures in the story occurs in 12:93 and 12:96. In 12:93, Joseph tells one of his brothers to cast his shirt upon Jacob's face, and 'he will come to see'. The shirt worn by Joseph thus represents the full embodiment of the virtues, since they become firmly rooted in the soul once it has completely passed through the barriers of time, space, and the limitations of its own lower nature. Since the entire self is now integrated into a higher order, into its primordial disposition or *fīra*, the very

body of such an individual exudes a fragrance. This is why at 12:94, Jacob is able to detect Joseph's scent, which is on his shirt, even before the shirt gets to him. In other words, the human being can be intellectually aware of the fruit of the spiritual life, but it needs the actual alchemical effect of the virtues to be actualized for it in order for it to see. And this is what happens at 12:96, where Jacob's eyesight is returned to him once Joseph's shirt is cast over his eyes.

The victory of the soul is perfectly prefigured at the beginning of the story of Joseph, when Joseph conveys his dream to Jacob. Although already 'with' the soul at the beginning of its journey, the victory of the soul as manifested in the dream is something that the soul has to actualize by going through the lived, human experience of separation from one's home and then the journey to return to that home. Thus, as we near the end of the story, at 12:100, the dream initially beheld by the soul is now something that it has realized on account of its overcoming its lower dimensions, striving in the truth, and actualizing the virtues.

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL OF STORIES

One question which remains is why the story of Joseph – itself recounted in 'the most beautiful discourse (*ahsan al-hadith*)' (39:23) (i.e., the Qur'an) – is referred to as 'the most beautiful of stories (*ahsan al-qasas*)' (12:3). It is precisely because this most beautiful of stories is the story of the perfection of man, who is created 'in the most beautiful stature (*ahsan al-taqwim*)' (95:4). In other words, the story of man can be a beautiful story if the outcome is deliverance and the actualization of his beautiful nature. The story of Joseph is thus 'the most beautiful of stories' because it is potentially your story and my story, recounting, through the symbolic dramatization of all of the story's characters, how our souls may navigate their way about the rugged terrain of earthly life. Since the Prophet says that 'God is beautiful and He loves beauty',¹² surely the most beautiful story can only be about how God's beauty is actualized by that human being who is fully realized, and for whom there 'shall be a reward unceasing' (95:6) on account of God's love for him. And it is such a human being, having become truly beautiful and beloved to God, who emerges as the victorious hero in the most beautiful of stories, which is the story of his own life.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HISTORY AND PERSPECTIVE IN UNDERSTANDING MEDIAEVAL PHILOSOPHY: THE CASE OF MAIMONIDES' RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION OF ETERNITY

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to show how taking history and perspective into consideration could help in understanding mediaeval philosophy. To that end, in spite of a philosophical assumption which usually considers that there is no connection between eternity and creation, the paper assumes that Maimonides planned to establish a distinct response which was neither creation nor eternity. Investigating Maimonides' perspective will be approached in two ways. Firstly, through the distinction between Maimonides, on one hand and theologians and philosophers on the other will be discussed from an intellectual point of view. Al-Ghazali will be compared to Maimonides to show that, despite initial impressions, they differ substantially from each other on this issue. It will also be shown how Maimonides differentiated his discourse from that of the Greek philosophers. It will firstly be shown here that Maimonides' response to the question of eternity adopts a different position from that of the classical theologians and the ancient philosophers. Secondly, the historicity of Maimonides' discourse, or whether anyone else shared Maimonides' conciliatory approach, will be examined. It will be shown that Averroes has the highest affinity with Maimonides in this regard. This will result in recognition of the fact that Maimonides' "conciliatory approach" was shared with some other mediaeval philosophers such as Averroes. Ultimately, it will be explained how Maimonides' complicated concept of eternity can be better understood and justified if one takes perspective and historical discourse into consideration, showing that he was someone who tried to incorporate "conciliatory discourse" into mediaeval philosophy.

INTRODUCTION

During the Middle Ages, there was a cultural cross-fertilization of ideas between Muslims, Jews and Christians. Amongst various debates, the question of whether the world has been created or has been eternal (i. e. *Al-Hadith aw Al-Qidam*) called for philosophers' and theologians' attention, as it was a crucial debate in mediaeval philosophy. In addition to Jewish and Christian

¹² This tradition is found in the standard sources. See, for example, Muslim b. al-Hajjaj al-Qushayri, *al-Sahih* (Cairo: Matba'at Muhammad 'Alī Ṣābiḥ, 1915-1916), Imām 41.