

LITERARY STRUCTURES IN THE QUR'ANIC AND BIBLICAL STORIES OF JOSEPH

Mustansir Mir's recent discovery¹ of a literary structure in the sura of Joseph has far reaching implications for the study of the relationship between the Qur'an and the Bible. Mir himself appears to have realized this, for he concludes his essay as follows:

In analyzing the story I have confined myself largely to the data furnished by the Qur'an, and have not made any explicit comparisons between the Qur'anic and Biblical accounts of the story. Such a comparative study, if undertaken along the lines here followed, could well throw new light on some of the hitherto insufficiently explored aspects of the relationship between the two scriptures.²

The present note, which will forward a striking similarity between the Qur'anic and Biblical stories of Joseph, attempts to answer this call. It is not, as its length alone indicates, a comprehensive treatment of the subject. Nevertheless, it is hoped that even a small contribution will be beneficial to those who wish to explore further the relationship between Sura 12 and Genesis 37-50.

Mir posits the following literary structure for the sura of Joseph:³

- A. Joseph's dream (4-6)
- B. The brother's plot against Joseph (7-22)
- C. Potiphar's wife's attempt to seduce Joseph (23-29)
- D. A similar attempt by Egyptian ladies (30-34)
- E. Joseph's imprisonment (35-42)
- F. The king's dream (43-44)
- F'. The king's dream interpreted (45-49)
- E'. Joseph's release from prison (50)
- D'. Confession of the Egyptian ladies (51a)
- C'. Confession of Potiphar's wife (51b-57)
- B'. The brothers learn their lesson (58-99)
- A'. Fulfillment of Joseph's dream (100-101)

Mir notes, correctly, that "Major tensions are created in roughly the first half of the story After that the plot begins to unravel, but the tensions are resolved

¹ Mustansir Mir, "The Qur'anic Story of Joseph: Plot, Themes, and Characters," *MW*, LXXVI (1986), 1-15.

² *Ibid.*, 15.

³ Although Mir deserves credit for the discovery of this literary structure, let it be noted that his overall point has been anticipated by Marilyn Robinson Waldman, "New Approaches to 'Biblical' Materials in the Qur'an," *MW*, LXXV (1985), 9: "The story has a circular shape—its opening is echoed in its closing."

in reverse order.⁴ Additional parallels, such as the brothers engaging in a huddle in 8–10 and then again in 80–81, cement the relationship between parts A–F and their matching units F'–A'. Accordingly, the author has created a palistrophe, a rhetorical device that builds an entire story based on chiasmic structure.⁵ To Mir's posited structure, we should also add the introductory verses 1–3 and the concluding verses 102–11. These passages act as bookends to frame the tale and to place it in a general Qur'anic context.⁶

What is striking about this patterning is that the same technique was used by the ancient Israelite writer in composing his story of Joseph. As I have demonstrated in my recently published book on Genesis, the literary structure of the Biblical story is as follows:⁷

- A. Joseph's dreams; Jacob and Joseph part (37:1–36)
- B. Interlude: Joseph not present (38:1–30)
- C. Reversal: Joseph guilty, Potiphar's wife innocent (39:1–23)
- D. Joseph hero of Egypt (40:1–41:57)
- E. Two trips to Egypt (42:1–43:34)
- F. Final test (44:1–34)
- F'. Conclusion of test (45:1–28)
- E'. Two tellings of migration to Egypt (46:1–47:12)
- D'. Joseph hero of Egypt (47:13–27)
- C'. Reversal: Ephraim firstborn, Manasseh secondborn (47:28–48:22)
- B'. Interlude: Joseph nominally present (49:1–28)
- A'. Fulfillment of Joseph's dreams; Jacob and Joseph part (49:29–50:26)

Moreover, various themes and theme-words again unite the matching units, for example, the use of *way^lmā^len*, "he resisted," in 39:8 and 48:19. An especially remarkable similarity between the Qur'anic and Biblical stories is the use by both authors of Joseph's dream(s) and its (their) fulfillment in units A and A'.

It is possible, of course, that the similar literary structures in the two versions is a total coincidence. However, given the relatively similar plot lines in the sura of Joseph and Genesis 37–50⁸—and they are closer to one another than many other examples of Qur'anic-Biblical parallels—it is hardly surprising that some would see the structure of the Arabic version as a conscious imitation of its Hebrew antecedent.

⁴ Mir, "The Qur'anic Story," 1.

⁵ For the term "palistrophe," see Sean E. McEvenue, *The Narrative Style of the Priestly Writer* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute: 1971), pp. 157–58.

⁶ See especially Angelika Neuwirth, "Zur Struktur der *Yūsuf-Sure*," in W. Diem and S. Wild, eds., *Studien aus Arabistik und Semitistik: Anton Spitaler zum siebzigsten Geburtstag* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1980), pp. 123–52, especially p. 139; and Angelika Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1981), p. 297. Based on other considerations, Neuwirth has her own views on the structure of this and many other Meccan suras. For a comprehensive review of her stimulating volume, see Alford T. Welch, *JAOS*, CIII (1983), 764–67.

⁷ For complete details, see Gary A. Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1986), pp. 79–97.

⁸ Actually, only Genesis 37–46 is paralleled in the Qur'anic story of Joseph.

Scholars should be grateful to Mir for pointing out the literary device of chiasitic structure in the Qur'ān. Biblicists have come to recognize this as a relatively common technique in ancient Hebrew narration.⁹ Other Near Eastern literatures witness such structures as well.¹⁰ Further investigation will presumably turn up other examples in the Qur'ān.¹¹ In the very least, then, irrespective of the exact relationship between the two palistrophes of the two Joseph stories, we may wish to speak of a Near Eastern literary tradition which saw such patterning as an effective way of structuring narrative prose.

*Cornell University
Ithaca, New York*

GARY A. RENDSBURG

⁹ See, among others, Umberto Cassuto, *From Noah to Abraham* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1964), p. 296; Michael Fishbane, "Composition and Structure in the Jacob Cycle (Gen. 25:19-35:22)," *JJS*, XXVI (1975), 40-62; J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Assen and Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1975). The list of palistrophes compiled by A. DiMarco, "Der Chiasmus in der Bibel, 1. Teil," *LB*, XXXVI (1975), 21-97; "Der Chiasmus in der Bible, 2. Teil," *LB*, XXXVII (1976), 49-68, is impressive but many are either very minor or not present at all.

¹⁰ See the sources cited by Fishbane, "Composition and Structure," 19, nn. 21-26; Fishbane, *Text and Texture*, 146, nn. 4-6; and Joann Dewey, *Markan Public Debate* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980), pp. 34-35, 206-207, nn. 125-53. Many more suggestions may be found in the essays in John W. Welch, ed., *Chiasmus in Antiquity* (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg Verlag, 1981), but as even a brief look at this volume will indicate, many of these posited structures lack perfect symmetry.

¹¹ Of course, since the sura of Joseph is the best example of extended narrative in the Qur'ān, it is conceivable that only here will a palistrophe be found. But the likelihood is that even in other suras chiasm is present.