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Primordial Covenant & Joseph: Metaphoricity in the Quran

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Jacob's reunion with Joseph (Nišāpūrī, ~~Ishāq ibn Ibrāhīm~~. *Qışaş al-anbiyā'*. MS. PPN615574084. Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, 15XX, p. [182] 82v. Accessed July 23, 2025. https://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht?PPN=PPN615574084&PHYSID=PHYS_0170&DMID=DMDLOG_0014).

Nothing is like even His likeness (Q42:11)

لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ

None is His like (Q112:4)

وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ كُفُوًا أَحَدٌ

But we are closer to the human being than her jugular vein

(Q50:16)

وَنَحْنُ أَقْرَبُ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ حَبْلِ الْوَرِيدِ

God speaks to humanity in metaphors (Q24:35)

وَيَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَالَ لِلنَّاسِ

To God belong the most exalted metaphors (Q16:60)

وَلِلَّهِ الْأَمْثَالُ الْأَعْلَى

Abstract

It is remarkable that so little scholarship has been devoted to the rich topic of the Primordial Covenant and the related topic of emotion in the Quran. The most recent guides or companions to the Quran, edited by leaders in the field, barely refer to it. Perhaps earlier Christian polemics against Islam which tended to see the revelation of the Quran as a function of Muhammad's perceived emotional instability has thus left a doubly negative mark. Here the focus is metaphors of emotion, as a mode of cognition in the Quran: 1) emotions of God, represented by the Quranic names and attributes, 2) the role of God in the life of the believer and the community, which entails a metaphorical-emotional bond, and 3) the emotions of the prophets. Of special interest is Joseph whose "imitation of God" is charged with emotional energy and vitality. The approach adopted is towards the poetics of the text and the way words, images and vignettes may apply to both the unknowable God and, in this case, the comparatively knowable prophet Joseph.

مَا كَذَبَ الْفُؤَادُ مَا رَأَى

The heart lied not of what it saw.

Quran 53:11

Introduction

The Quran is a symphony of emotion, although this word “emotion” seems to be one for which there is no precise equivalent or cognate in the Quran. “Emotion” only started being used for feelings, and then not much, in the early 17th century (OED). It was not until the mid-19th century that it became relatively current in American English. In recent decades, since 1980, the word Emotion has enjoyed highly increased popularity in both American and British English (Google Ngram). It should not surprise us, therefore, that there is no direct equivalent for the word “emotion” in the Quran. It nonetheless remains that the inner life of the human being is one of the Quran’s major themes and that one of the ways in which the Quran speaks about this inner life is through the complex web of divine names and attributes of God and the metaphors

they generate. In this discussion, these names and attributes emerge as indices of the inner life of the human being who worships an utterly unknowable divine Being.

Instead of “emotion,” the Quran uses an extensive vocabulary of words like soul (*nafs*), spirit (*rūḥ*), several related near synonyms: *qalb*, *ṣadr*, *lubb* (always in the plural *albāb*), *aḥlām* and *fu’ād*, all of which represent the inner life and, in some sense, can be translated as “heart”. These words are in a different category than those numerous Quranic words which stand for distinct emotions, such as anger,

sadness, fear, and happiness. Heart, in the ancient literature of many cultures, has frequently been understood as the seat or center of both perception/cognition and emotion (Schroer and Staubli 2005, 33ff, esp. 35). So, we are on safe ground, given the sheer number of times these heart words are used in the Quran, when we refer to it as a symphony of emotions.

The word symphony is carefully chosen for its quite apposite aesthetic resonance with music and therefore the Quran’s undeniable musicality.

Quranic musicality entails an orchestration of not just sounds but also ideas, colors, smells, tastes, haptics, time and space, in addition to the feelings otherwise denoted by the absent word “emotion”. As such it may qualify as an example of Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* or “comprehensive work of art” (Lawson 2022, 186).

The word symphony, in addition to its aesthetic connotations, also represents the idea of ordering, in this case a vast field of sometimes conflicting and sometimes confusing feelings and other events of the inner life such as knowing. In the Quran, the human soul (*nafs*) emerges as that without which there would not be symphony but only cacophony and chaos. Emotions in the Quran, it has recently been remarked, provide a certain continuity and coherence for the book (Bauer 2017, 25). The Quran is thus interested in educating us about the soul as much as it is interested in educating the soul, the heart, the feelings, the inner human reality. The Quranic heart or soul, known by those words mentioned above, does not have to do only with those things we call emotions. It is also an organ of cognition and perception. The vastness of the soul or heart for Islamic

psychology and spirituality is indicated by the title of one of the more important works of Islamic scholarship from the mid-twentieth century, the magisterial study of Farīduddīn ‘Attār (d. 1221) by Helmut Ritter called *The Ocean of the Soul* (Ritter 2003; Ritter 1955). This title is derived from metaphors used in ‘Attār’s beloved epic poem, *Conference of the Birds*, (*Manṭiq aṭ-Ṭayr*). Even though Ritter’s classic and still unsurpassed book is not a study of the Quran per se, it is clear from it that the poetry of ‘Attār is profoundly conditioned by the Quran and its rich, incessant discourse of interiority.

The Quran is also, in some real sense, a record – however partial – of Muhammad’s lived experience. This experience was intensely emotional and mystical, as the oldest biography, the *Sīra*, is not ashamed to attest and illustrate (Guillaume 1955, *passim*). Such intensity can function as one of the “proofs” of authenticity. Unfortunately, such emotional intensity has been two-edged, functioning also as a polemical topos in especially European criticisms of Islam. Sometimes it is difficult to discern in language the difference between the

emotional and the mystical. What one of the great living Arab poets, Adonis, has said about mystical poetry may be said also of the relationship between emotion, mystical experience and enlightenment in the Quran:

This text arises basically from a vision which does not divide a human being into two distinct parts— thought and feeling, or emotion and intellect — but considers him [the human being] as an indivisible whole, a force of unified consciousness (Adonis 1990, 183).

The Islamic mystical tradition especially, but certainly not only, in the countless books of formal exegesis, *tafsīr*, has provided a fine guide to the mystico-emotional terrain of the Quran which it reads largely as a love song. The classic book by Annemarie Schimmel's monumental, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Schimmel 1975), could, from one point of view, be entitled "*Emotional Dimensions of Islam*." Muhammad's experience is not only emotional, but a large part of it is. And this emotion, together with the normative content and the so-called "Salvation history" it describes, is communicated to a receptive audience in terms of intensity and urgency, an audience who 'understood' ~~emotion~~.

Revelation here most certainly entails performance. As we know, not all Muhammad's audience were convinced. The Quran has numerous verses in which it is recorded that those who did not accept the new revelation accused the prophet of being a madman, *majnūn* (Q15:6; 44:14; 52:29; 54:9; 68:2; 68:51; 81:22) the very word that provides a name for the famous extra-Quranic hero of love in the *Majnun and Layla* cycle of poems. Moreover, the Quran insists that all prophets and messengers of God – the number of which in the Quran is 25 but the number which the Islamic tradition proposes ~~being~~ 124,000 – have been accused of madness by their critics and enemies (Q51:52). Such an accusation causes us to think of the role and plight of the contemporary artist whose creative work departs from the accepted and familiar to challenge taste and conventional expectations and who is therefore similarly disparaged. The intense emotional weight of the Quran points to the role of Muhammad as rhapsode and storyteller as well as lawgiver. In such a context, the readings of later commentators and theologians (*fuqahā'*, *mutakallimūn*, *mufasssirūn*) sometimes bring to mind the predicament and

role of the art critic who may sincerely love art but is unable to create or produce it or fully understand the artistic mind that produced it.

The defining voice of the Quran is one of intensity and majesty, whether such intensity be of fear, hope, beauty, love, sorrow, repentance, regret, joy, or friendship, to name only a few possibilities. The Quran is about ultimate matters. The intensity derives from the urgency of the message, the supremely unknowable yet somehow intimate source of the message, the hateful conditions in which the addressees are seemingly trapped, and the concomitant balancing power of God's redemptive promise of divine mercy,

unconditional love and compassion. Quranic compassion and forgiveness are sharpened and heightened by the Quranic theme of hell and heaven, both presented in terms designed to evoke the most powerful emotions in line with the hideous, torture and pain of Hell or the unspeakably beautiful, delightful, and peaceful images of the eschatological Paradise in the Quran (Günther and Lawson 2017, [passim](#)).

Divine emotions

The dense emotional forest of the Quran may also be judged by reference to its characteristic gospel of divine names and attributes, many of which are of a purely emotional content. These “most beautiful names” represent ~~most~~ emotional spectrum from wrath to patience to love, to name only three. The doctrine of Quranic divine names sometimes insists that there are [only] 99. However, an attentive count of the various words that qualify as divine names or attributes in the Quran far exceeds this number (Gardet 2012). If we count beyond the Quran in Hadith, Kalām, Mysticism and even philosophy, the number continues to grow.

At Q2:3, in the very beginning of the Text (the *Muṣḥaf*) the Quran stipulates that it is a Book revealed exclusively for those who believe in the invisible realm, *al-ghayb*, the unseen, sometimes capitalized in translation: the Unseen. Thus, the Quranic motif or theme of the divine names and attributes is thought to be a good place to begin a discussion of metaphor and emotions because

an emotion is an invisible inner event that “moves out” of the invisible realm to the visible. The divine names and attributes entail a double invisibility because in the first place they pertain to the invisible, utterly unknowable God, for whom they function in many cases very much like human emotions: strong feelings that move from the plane of the invisible, the inner life of the heart, to have an effect in the social or public sphere. Such is particularly germane for the study of the Quran because not only is God described as being beyond perception and conception “nothing is even like His likeness / *laysa ka-mithlihi shay*’ (Q42:11), God is also closer to an individual human than her jugular vein, *ḥabl al-warīd* (Q55:16) – another reference to the inner, invisible realm.

God may be wrathful or compassionate and forgiving. Such divine emotions in fact represent a main theme of the Quranic revelation and are subjected to what is obviously a poetic and artistic rendering to make such divine emotions more immediate and poignant. The Quran frequently employs images of pure, flowing water as a metaphorical reference to divine revelation

or even law, as in the word *Sharīʿa* (lit. “path to the water”), in order to provide poetic realism, what T. S. Eliot called the “objective correlative”, a theory which says “there is a verbal formula for any given state of emotion that when found and used will evoke that state and no other” (Rajan 1994, 223). The epistemological problem is simple to express: God is unknowable, *nothing is like Him* (Q112:4, a capitalized “*It*” might be better except that such a translation choice would be distractingly cold, unalive).

Thus, when the Quran wishes to communicate the reality of God’s compassion, a God who is otherwise utterly unknowable, it must resort to figurative language. And with Arabic we have a language whose potential for figuration and poetry is unsurpassed if not unmatched. God’s mercy (*rahma*) may be communicated through images of pure life-giving water while his wrath may be communicated through images of destructive rainstorms and floods (Lawson 2008). Such calls to mind the powerful insight that in literature the four elements function as “hormones of the imagination” (Bachelard 1943, 19). Similarly, God’s otherwise immeasurable

power and might is frequently communicated through what has elsewhere been referred to as “tropes of intensity” such as the Hour (Q x 48), the Event (title of Q56, al-Wāqi‘a), the beautiful Light verse (Q24:35), the Throne verse (Q2:255), and those elaborate and detailed descriptions of Paradise and Hell (*passim*) (Lawson 2017, xxiv, xxvi, 28, 29). Intensity itself seems at times to be a distinct feature, theme and even dramatic character of the Quran. As said, just as God is infinitely remote and unknowable, God is also infinitely close though equally unknowable. Such contrasts are also charged with and transmit powerful emotions. In such cases emotions and the metaphors by which they are generated are as much a part of the Quranic message as anything else and that part of the Quran’s curriculum is precisely meant to teach humans how to feel and what to feel, a sentimental education, in order to develop emotional intelligence or an ecology of emotion.

In the grammar of the Quranic call there is a set of fundamental “minimal pairs” that speak directly to the importance of emotion and, more to the point, their control, for the cultivation of

civil society. The first two such elements are *jahl* and *islām*. We are perhaps more familiar with the second, *islām*, which is frequently translated as “submission” but more intelligible to a contemporary audience as “commitment”, i.e., to the message from God. The first word, *jahl*, means ignorance, viz, of how to be civilized. Chief amongst the elements of *jahl*, in addition to polytheism and miserliness, is the tendency to “flaring anger” which the Quran condemns as one of the prime character traits of ignorance. This lack of emotional control is set off against its opposite, *ḥilm*, (Lawson 2017, 125–126) a classical Arabic word, much attested in the pre-Islamic poetry, standing for “gentleness, tolerance, forbearance” and the control of anger. Islam then emerges as a synonym for this pre-Islamic Arab virtue, a virtue, as we shall see, that the prophet Joseph evinced when he forgave his brothers (Q12:92). It happens also to be a frequent divine name. God is the “Ever-forgiving” (*ḥalīm* x15, e.g Q2:225). In such a context, it is conceivable that the divine name is revealed in the mode of prayer, a prayer asking for or petitioning the emotional and spiritual attribute of forbearance, rather than some positive information about the

infinitely unknowable God's "personality" and emotional health.

Divine signs

The metaphorical emotionality, or interiority of the Quran – what may be thought of in a real sense as its esoteric dimension – is evident in each verse and in the idea of "verse" which in Arabic is *āya*, "divine sign." Here, sign should be understood with the extra, strong connotation of miracle, as in the doctrine of the miraculous nature of the Quran, *i'jāz al-Qur'ān*. Such miraculousness, the perception of which carries an emotional and metaphorical response, derives from two conditions: 1) God is completely remote but somehow communicates anyway in the "language of the community" (Q14:4); 2) Muhammad was neither a poet nor a religious "professional" – but he was *al-nabī al-ummī*, sometimes understood as "the illiterate prophet". The fact that the culture in which Muhammad lived and taught was largely oral and reading and writing did not really exist in his milieu makes such an understanding problematic to say the least (Günther 2002). One might prefer "highly original", "self-taught", or "independent" as

translations, instead of “illiterate”. A large part of this language is not merely

about emotion but consists of emotion. Such is indicated in the Quran’s distinctive “theory of signs” whose defining verse at Q41:53 says that revelatory communications – divine signs – from God are deposited in the natural realm and in the souls of human beings:

سُرِّيهِمْ ءَايَاتِنَا فِي الْآفَاقِ وَفِي أَنْفُسِهِمْ حَتَّىٰ يَتَبَيَّنَ لَهُمْ أَنَّهُ الْحَقُّ

We will show them our Signs in the (furthest) regions (of the earth), and in their own souls, until it becomes manifest to them that this is the Truth (Yusuf Ali).

The Quranic theory of divine signs (*āyāt*) is especially interesting in the present discussion because of these two theatres of operation: the inner realm and the outer realm. A divine sign, *āya*, may be understood as the smallest increment of divine communication. A molecule of knowledge, if you will. These signs God uses to communicate with human beings through several media: 1) prophets and messengers, their examples and their scriptures; 2) the so-called

natural realm; 3) and the spiritual or inner realm of the individual, the heart, the space of emotion and metaphor. All three regions, it seems, are to be coordinated in the attempt to read the signs of God correctly, not necessarily univocally.

Signs (*āyāt*) are components of revelation or the holy book and also a technical term for verses in the case of the Quran. This distinctive usage indicates a qualitative or generic difference between Quranic artistry and poetic artistry (even if both are artistry). The word sign as verse – *āya* (with pl. *āyāt*) – is only used for the Quran. A verse of poetry is called a *bayt* (pl. *abyāt*) “tent” or “dwelling” – wherein meaning is assumed to reside: A sign, by contrast, not only contains meaning but *is* meaning.

Duality and Opposition

Another distinctive Quranic motif is that of duality and opposition, in which the distance between such opposites as “good and evil”, “salvation and damnation”, “believer and

unbeliever” may be thought to indicate an emotional spectrum guaranteed and nuanced by those very divine attributes which speak also to the emotional life of humanity (Lawson 2017, 26–93). Further, the Quran, especially in the mystical or anagogical tradition frequently identified with Sufism, is read according to a series of interlocking levels of meaning describing a parallel hermeneutic spectrum between the obvious, *ẓāhir* “exoteric” and the inner, *bāṭin* “esoteric”. The number of hermeneutic schemes and levels entailed can vary widely from author to author. But it remains that the inner – or esoteric – life of the Quran is connected with the inner life of the believer or reader and the two are joined in a dynamic circulation of emotional and metaphoric energy which is also noetic and produces knowledge. Thus, in some respects the word for interpretation in Arabic, *ta’wīl* “taking to its origin” may allude to the originary experience of the prophet Muhammad in all its mystical, emotional and intellectual complexity and its communication to the believer as example and object for both emulation and contemplation. But the true origin to which all Quranic verses ultimately refer is the Day of the Covenant, a

spiritual event, recounted at Q7:172, that occurred before time and space were created. We will return to this soon.

Such sheds some light on one of the modern Arabic words for emotions, *mashā'ir*. It may well be that the word *yash'uru* “to know, perceive”, derived from the frequent Quranic triliteral consonantal root *sh-‘ayn-ra*, which occurs 40 times in the Quran, is more than a verb of cognition (Bauer 2017, 27n.54). In its various derivations it means “poet” five times: Q21:5; 26:22; 37:36; 52:30; 69:41. It can mean “to understand or perceive”, (27 times), or refer to symbols or rites (four times), and finally once as hair (Q16:80). Ibn Arabi (d. 1240), the greatest of Muslim mystics, would have no difficulty in relating all these meanings to a process of spiritual encounter and enlightenment in his virtuosic reading of the triliteral root *sh-‘ayn-ra* (Addas 1996). It is clear that this root speaks of a field of perception which is the province of the heart, and which must include feeling as a component of what we normally think of as “understanding”. Perhaps we have here a kind of semantic phenomenon found in the so-called

slang or term from the technical lexicon of what is chiefly recognized as African American ~~especially~~ musical culture and for which the problematic word jazz is still too frequently used. I refer to the verb “to dig” in which the meaning is either to understand or to love, or to understand and love at the same time.

The Quran is very much embarked upon an education of the emotions. There is nothing in the Quran that corresponds to a modern understanding of the word brain as the source or locus of intellection, cognition, or even feeling. The well-known Arabic word *‘aql* “intellect” is a post-Quranic terminological refinement based on the 49 verbal usages in the Quran, usages which mean “to use reason” or “to understand”. There is no noun “intellect” in the Quran (de Boer and Rahman 2012). All such mental “action” occurs in and by means of the heart, which, as we have seen, has several cognates in Quranic Arabic. This would seem quite unexceptionable and obvious to those “companions of the Quran” for whom each verse is more like a branch of the burning bush (Padwick 1996, 17) than this or that religious declamation (although it may be that also).

The Day Of The Covenant

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
(T.S. Eliot, Little Gidding, Four Quartets)*

The Primordial Covenant or Day of the Covenant (*yawm al-mīthāq*) occupies a unique and immeasurably powerful place in the mind and soul of Islam. But it is also quite mysterious and apparently counter-logical, supra-rational. This seemingly fantastic, obscure, abstruse, supra-rational Quranic teaching is made especially understandable in the Sura of Joseph. It is not suggested that this is the only purpose of what is understood as the most beautiful sura of the Quran, but it does suggest that it is a significant theme that deserves to be studied more fully. Indeed, the Day of the Covenant itself, as a distinct Quranic teaching, also deserves to be much more researched and studied given its centrality to the Quranic worldview and the unprecedented and unambiguous teaching of the oneness of humanity that it promulgates. So important to Islam, it may well be wondered why

it is included neither among the so-called Pillars of Religion nor the Pillars of Belief. But we will leave this question for a future occasion.

If one considers the form and structure of the Quran as it exists today, the arrangement of suras in what is known as the *Muṣḥaf* – that form in which the comparatively “raw material” – the chronologically revealed Quran, known as the *Tanzīl* (li. “that which was sent down”) – was cast and arranged by the early community, then it is possible to observe the broad outlines of an epic form (Lawson 2017 i-26). Such form must be deliberate. By contrast, if the Quran had been left in its original, chronologically revealed sequence, the epic “venture” of Islam and its prophet would not be so readily understood or discerned. Imagine reading a Bible whose opening chapter is not Genesis but the Book of Revelation.

In the Quran we see typical and usual epic features and themes: unusual or orphaned birth, banishment from home, separation, trial, triumph and return, to name only the most conspicuous epic motives in the Quran. While

the Quran book (viz *Muṣḥaf*) begins with sura one, al-Fatiha, the “Opening”, the epic journey, process and struggle described by the Quran begins at Q7:172-173 with an expression of intense emotion. This is the enthusiastic affirmative response of humanity to God’s originary question *Am I not your Lord?* This scene is generally understood in Quranic exegesis as having occurred in a time and place before creation (*lā makān, lā zamān*). The *dramatis personae* are God, in the person of *your Lord* and the spirits of all humanity (that would ever be), before their creation (Qadi 2006, 1–8). The verses in English translation are:

Recall, when thy Lord drew forth from the Children of Adam. – from their loins – their descendants, and made them testify concerning themselves, (saying): “Am I not your Lord (who cherishes and sustains you)?” – They said: “Yea! We do testify!” (This), lest ye should say on the Day of Judgment: “Of this we were never mindful” (Yusuf Ali, adapted).

Or lest ye should say: “Our fathers before us may have taken false gods, but we are (their) descendants after them: will You then destroy us because of the deeds of men who were vain?” (Yusuf Ali)

Though this passage occurs deep in the Quran/*Muṣḥaf*, it is really the true beginning for

the history of the relation between God and humanity and represents the starting point of the Quranic story of this relation. It sets the tone for the entire Quran. It marks the beginning of consciousness and history. That it occurs not in the very beginning of the Text, where instead we find the Fatiha, merely points to the epic structure of the Quran as beginning *in medias res* as do all good epics. The important point here is that this beginning is characterized by emotion, not law, not salvation history, not communal identity. Rather the opposite: the only identity at play here is that of humanity and its loving connection with God, the unknowable, who here uses the voice of *Your Lord* (*rabbika* and *rabbikum*), a divine name which despite the strong Quranic interdiction of fatherhood for Allah, nonetheless enfolds many implications for a non-generative, non-biological if you will, divinely paternal role.

It might be argued that the task of *tafsīr* or any other form of Quranic exegesis, is to somehow supply the intonation, accent and stress, that is the emotion and music of the original oral revelation. How are we to hear the question “Am

I not your Lord”? Is it in the tonality of a stern, taskmaster, such as Blake’s Nobodaddy? Is it in the tone of a loving and sustaining parent? Is it in the tone of a lover? How are we to understand the response of humanity, their collective and unhesitating “Yes!/balā”? Is it the response of an oppressed and frightened child forced to submit to an abusive parent? Is it the response of a child who knows they are cherished by a loving father? Is it the response of a beloved who is eager and happy to answer such ultimately meaningless and maybe even mildly irritating questions as a way of expressing the ineffability of the love they feel for the one who asked, the one who already knew the answer?

God poses the primordial question to all humanity: “Am I not your Lord?” and all humanity immediately respond: “Yes! To this we all testify”. This enthusiastic, joyful and loving response marks the beginning of the covenant between God and humanity and the “date” of this brief exchange is known as the Day of the Covenant ~~in Islam~~. The Quranic epic unfolds from this point with creation, prophets, communities, trials and tribulations, all of which

are wending toward what is called in the immediately following verse, Q7:173, the Day of Rising (*qiyāma*), the day of return and judgment. Thus resurrection, in the narratological structure of the Quran, represents a homecoming after a collective epic journey in which all humanity has been given challenges through which to prove their fidelity to the originary covenant of Q7:172 and their love of God. That the Quran achieves here a sense of loving father for God while at the same time never violating God's utter transcendence is characteristic of the Quran's remarkable literary power sometimes referred to as "lawful magic" (*sihr ḥalāl*).

This epic may be thought to be replayed or re-invoked with the career of every prophet and messenger, whether they are mentioned in the Quran or not, each of whom plays out in their own lives and vocation a particular version of the epic frame story. Each prophet is called by God to shoulder the burden of leading their community to righteousness and the recognition of divine oneness (*tawḥīd*) originally realized on the Day of the Covenant, in a specific cultural setting in which ignorance (*jahl*) or forgetfulness of that

original day, has burgeoned and must now be transformed and thus eradicated. The community is also implicated in this epic heroism. One of the levels of the Quran's emotional dynamics is precisely the excitement of adventure, challenge, and the concomitant struggles between good and evil, faith and unfaith, truth and error, guidance and straying, among the many pairs of opposites in the Quran which, again, function much like minimal pairs in a new monotheistic language of interiority and ethics. To summarize the relevant features of the Day of the Covenant: 1) all humanity was present, 2) they were addressed by God speaking with the voice of Father; 4) they were addressed collectively and individually: each person was spoken to directly by God, "their Lord"; 5) its mood may be likened to a dream, there is a mixture of unreality and reality.

Joseph

قُلُوبٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ وَاجِفَةٌ

Hearts, that Day, will be athrob.

Quran 79:8

The sura of Joseph (*Yūsuf*), sura 12 of the Quran, is remarkable for its emotional profile and its spiritual-literary – that is to say, metaphoric – dynamics. These dynamics will become clearer in connection with a discussion of the central idea of covenant in the Quran. It is suggested here that an understanding of the emotional content and verve of Q7:172 is explicated and dramatized in the Quran's 12th sura where Joseph's story is told in relative fullness and consistency. This miniature epic of Joseph and his triumph over betrayal, jealousy and separation from home mirrors in interesting ways the greater Quranic epic which began on the Day of the Covenant. It is not suggested that this is its only function. There is a very rich bibliography of scholarship about the Sura of Joseph that points to many different approaches and frequently mutually corroborative studies

revealing a wide variety of possible readings (Lawson 2017, 218–235). Of these, one of the more compelling is the idea that the story of Joseph was “performed” for the early community by the prophet Muhammad as a way of drawing out the typological resemblance between Joseph’s career and Muhammad’s (Johns 1981; Stern 1985; Kennedy 2016, 64–74, 92–145). As much is emphasized in the *Sīra*, the earliest biography of Muhammad, when after the conquest of Mecca Muhammad announced to the vanquished and formerly hostile enemy (as it happens his own family the Quraysh), that God has forgiven them their betrayal (Prémare 1989, 5, 42, 129, 175, and references). In doing this Muhammad quotes to them the words of Joseph from Q12:92, which occur towards the end of the sura when his perfidious brothers having just realized that the powerful Egyptian official (*al-‘Azīz*) with whom they had been dealing was actually their betrayed (at their own hands) long-lost brother Joseph. Their hearts are trembling in fear. Muhammad forgives his unfaithful “brothers” (the Quraysh) thus “I will say to you now what my brother Joseph said to his [guilty] brothers, He said

‘On this day let no reproach be (cast) on you: God will forgive you, and God is the Most Merciful of those who show mercy!’ (Q12:92, Yusuf Ali adapted).”

This forgiveness, as explained in Genesis, and perhaps understood in Muhammad’s milieu, is because if Joseph’s brothers had not sold him into slavery he would not have eventually attained the power and influence necessary to save Jacob and his family “Israel” from the famine in Canaan (Gen 50:15–21). In the Quran it is simply said that Satan caused the enmity between Joseph and his brothers (Q12:100).

As to the mood of the exchange on the Day of the Covenant, summarized above, it is suggested that we may be able to supply an answer to such questions by reading the story of Joseph (Q12) as a performative exegesis of that primordial exchange between humanity and their Lord. The story of Joseph, deemed by the Quran and Muslims as “the most beautiful of all stories” (*aḥsan al-qasas*, Q12:3), is full of powerful, sometimes destructive, emotion from beginning to end. The turbulent emotional content of the Joseph sura has been treated more fully elsewhere (Lawson 2024; Lawson 2012;

Kennedy 2016, 16–21; see also the discussion in Bauer 2017, 18–19). Here we focus mainly on the two verses and their respective events with which the sura begins and ends, namely bowing to Joseph. In the first, at Q12:4, eleven stars and the sun and moon bow down to Joseph in a dream he tells his beloved father:

Recall! Joseph said to his father: “Dear Father! I did see eleven stars and the sun and the moon: I saw them bow themselves to me!” (Yusuf Ali, slightly adjusted).

In the second verse, Q12:100, which provides closure for the Quranic story of Joseph and his epic travail, Joseph has arranged for Jacob and his family to perform a kind of Hijra from Canaan, now beset with famine, to live in peace, comfort and prosperity in Egypt (*Miṣr*). Remarkably, the Quran describes here a potentially scandalous scene in which his entire family bow down to Joseph who is now a mighty Egyptian prince (*al-ʿAzīz*, also a name of God in the Quran) seated, no less, on a throne (*ʿarsh*):

*And he raised his two parents to the throne, and they fell down in prostration, (all) before him. He said: “Dear Father! This is the fulfilment (*taʿwīl*) of my vision of old! God has made it come true! God was indeed good to me when God took me*

*out of prison and brought you (all here) out of the desert, (even) after Satan had sown enmity between me and my brothers. My Lord (**rabbī**) is subtle (**laṭīf**) in fulfilling what He wills, for truly He is the All-knowing, the All-wise (**al- ‘alīm al-ḥakīm**)*

As in the Quran, so in the Hebrew Bible, it is only God who merits being bowed to in worship. These two bows to Joseph troubled and embarrassed exegetes who resorted to different theories in order to explain away the theological scandal, a scandal very much on a par with the one that accompanied the Quran's several descriptions of God commanding the angels to bow down to Adam (Q2:34; 7:11–12; 15:29; 17:61; 18:50; 20:116; 38:72–74. See Tottoli 1999, 104). The exegetes decided that, in the case of Joseph, this potentially heretical bow is to be understood through a cultural anthropology which sees bowing in the time and place of the Joseph story as simply a form of greeting, completely innocent from a theological standpoint (Tottoli 1998, 26–28).

There are certain lexical, thematic and narratological resonances between the bowing scenes of the story of Joseph and the “affirmation

scene” of the primordial Day of the Covenant described at Q7:172–3. In the example of bowing in the sura of Joseph, a symbol of affirmation and commitment, the reader or audience is prepared rather thoroughly to understand the emotional mood of the gesture. From the first bow in Joseph’s dream the element of human emotion is replaced with the idea of the glory and grandeur of the most luminous celestial bodies visible in the sky, especially the night sky, a theatre of beauty. These heavenly bodies are bowing to Joseph’s superior beauty. Beauty, of course, frequently entails powerful emotion and this may be understood in reading Q12:4. But it is a somewhat disembodied or bloodless form of emotion. In the second bow at Q12:100 such is remedied. Here we are in the presence of pure human emotion as an expression of gratitude and love for Joseph’s magnanimity and peace-making: a symbol of respect for his travail, and atonement for betrayal. Furthermore, this bowing occurs before a throne, *‘arsh*, a word that occurs 28 times in the Quran. And, except here and in the account of *Bilqīs*, the Queen of Sheba (Q27:23,38,41–42), it is always a reference to the throne of God (Elias 2006). The Quran is clear:

Joseph occupies a throne just as God himself does.

The Quranic account of humanity's positive response to the Lord's cosmogonic question at Q7:172 has a pronounced dreamlike quality, removed as it is in time and place from earthly reality. The Islamic tradition, however, insists that however unreal and dreamlike it may seem, it nonetheless preserves and sacralizes the most real elements of being in the world: God's love and care for all and his promise to never leave humanity alone until the great ingathering, the Day of Rising (*qiyāma*) when all will return home to the divine presence in the same primordial harmony and peace that would have doubtless been also quite dreamlike, if not unimaginable, to the earliest audiences of the Quran.

Yet, as the jurists of Islam have observed, a bow is symbolic of a verbal assent such as *balā*, the *Yes indeed!* spoken by all humanity in Q 7:172, and a verbal assent is a symbol of a bow or prostration (*sujūd*) (Rippin 2012). So, we may understand both Josephian bows as really another form of mirroring the verbal exchange of

question and response at Q7:172. Such is commensurate with the divine power of Joseph's own epic story in which he is loved by Jacob (and therefore God) above all others, persecuted, kidnapped, trafficked, sexually abused, imprisoned, exonerated and elevated to the highest rank in Egypt (*ʿAzīz*), after Pharaoh himself. Throughout this tumultuous and deeply affecting ordeal it is the love of Jacob for Joseph, largely symbolized by the famous garment (*qamīṣ*), that sustains the narrative despite the various reversals and betrayals which cause the love to stand out as, in fact, the main character of the epic. This love is depicted in a number of ways in the sura, but it is chiefly bound up with Joseph's beauty.

Beauty, *ḥusn*, *jamāl*, is also a divine attribute, as is love, *ḥubb*, *tawallā*, *raḥma* and so forth. It is suggested here that this divine love and beauty, are made reasonable (cf. above "objective correlative") in the Joseph story in the second bowing scene by resonating with the "verbal bowing" – the assent to the powerful and loving question from *your Lord* / *rabbuka, rabbukum* of Q7:172. Lord is understood here according to the

etymology of the Arabic word *rabb* as nurturing, loving teacher - not unlike a father. Joseph's magnanimity and beauty, both physical and moral, reflect God's transcendent magnanimity and beauty.

There is in the story of Joseph, whether in the Hebrew Bible or the Quran, a perhaps Socratic confusion of identity between him and God. In Genesis, Joseph must remind his brothers that no matter how powerful he is, he is not God (Gen 50:19). In the Quran, Joseph is described with attributes normally reserved for describing God. At Q12:55 we read:

(Joseph) said: "Set me over the storehouses of the land: I am a true guardian (ḥafīẓ), and most knowing (ʿalīm)"

Despite attempts of translators to defuse another possible scandal, it is clear here that the Author of the Quran wishes the reader to compare Joseph with God by using two typical Quranic divine attributes, *ḥafīẓ* "all-preserving" and *ʿalīm* "all-knowing". The first divine attribute is formed on the root *ḥ-f-ẓ* which occurs 44 times in the Quran, and at least six times as an unambiguous

divine attribute (Q11:57; 12:64; 15:9; 21:82; 34:21; 42:6). The semantic charge of the root is preservation and protection. Thus, it is used to refer to the “Preserved Tablet / *lawḥ mahfūz* (Q85:22) in which the Quran is maintained in its pure form. It is also the basis of the key verb in the famous Throne verse (Q2:255) in which it is stated that God’s Throne is wider than the heavens and the earth and their preservation (*ḥifẓ*) does not tire Him. It is a word with much divine charisma and it occurs several times in the sura of Joseph as verb, participle and noun (Q12:12, 55, 63, 64, 65, 81). Interestingly it is used four times in reference to the inability of the evil brothers to preserve either Joseph or Benjamin from harm and their failure as trustworthy guardians (Q12:12, 63, 65, 81). It is used once to refer to God’s attribute as supreme preserver of all things (Q12:60) in direct contrast to the brothers and once, in the mouth of Joseph, who describes himself as a master of preservation, as above at Q12:55.

As for the divine attribute “all-knowing / *‘alīm*” which Joseph also uses to describe himself at Q12:55, this is perhaps an even more jarring

assertion. The Arabic trilateral root occurs 854 times in the Quran and represents the main word used for knowing, teaching and learning. It occurs in the above form, *‘alīm*, “all-knowing” as an attribute of God well over 150 times in the Quran, six times as a divine attribute in this sura (Q12:6, 19, 34, 76, 83) including the all-important verse of the second bowing scene in Q12:100 quoted earlier. The form in which it occurs in Q12:55, moreover, is imitative of the way in which divine attributes are invoked throughout the Quran, frequently forming the end stop for a verse of rhymed prose (*saj’*). Thus, a reader of the Quran would be forced to look twice at this verse because the first reading would be puzzling: *this cannot be Joseph referring to himself*. However, it is. Furthermore, it is a Joseph whose script, the revelation itself, is authored by God, the all-knowing the wise and, as the sura of Joseph emphasizes at Q12:100, the “very subtle” (*latīf*).

It is suggested that such “divine confusion” is repeated in the second bowing scene at Q12:100. It is a performative metaphor for the otherwise unknowable attitude and posture of God in the original dreamlike scene on the day of the

covenant. The role- reversal between Jacob and Joseph in the bowing seen is also emblematic of the basic apophatic uncertainty and aporetic theological character of the Quran. Thus, the Quran seems to be suggesting, to understand the conversation that took place on the primordial day of the covenant, we may closely examine the mood and motives of the bowing scene at Q12:100. And here is where emotions play a major theological, theogonic, theopathic and theophanic role.

God is described by numerous names and adjectives in the Quran and the Hadith. In this sura, several are used including one relatively rare attribute, the above-mentioned attribute of God, the *Most Subtle* (*latīf*), which occurs six other times in the Quran. This subtlety speaks directly to the story and figure of Joseph, who represents several divine attributes as we have seen (beauty, knowledge, guardianship, patience, obedience, faithfulness, intelligence, wisdom, forgiveness). He is simultaneously God and not God. While God is the Absolute Reality (*al-ḥaqq*)

Joseph is the metaphor (*majāz*) that reveals the otherwise unknowable reality. Joseph is therefore tinged with the divine in the metaphorical process. And in this operation the intense emotions that are essential to the story are instrumental.

The primary descriptor of Joseph is, of course, beauty. As the hadith says: “God created beauty (*ḥusn*) in a hundred parts and gave to Joseph ninety-nine” (Rashtī 1270/1853, 69). Joseph’s beauty is both physical and moral or spiritual. Just as there is identity confusion between Joseph and God, there is a similar blending and blurring of moral and physical beauty. Joseph’s beauty is a symbol of Jacob’s great love for his beautiful wife Rachel, who, at the beginning of the sura has already died in childbirth with Benjamin. Joseph’s beauty is, of course, two-edged. It is the cause of Jacob’s “unreasonable” and perhaps excessive love which stimulates the jealousy and enmity of Joseph’s older brothers. Joseph’s beauty is what causes him to be snatched up by a passing caravan because it is clear that this fine specimen will bring a good price at the slave market in Egypt. It is Joseph’s

beauty that causes the lady of his household (known in later tradition as Zulaykha), effectively his stepmother, to conceive a great physical yearning for him and attempt to seduce him. This in turn leads to his imprisonment. Throughout this Quranic *sonata to beauty*, emotions run very high. Such is exemplified in the famous scene when, overwhelmed by Joseph's supernatural beauty, Zulaykha's guests accidentally cut their hands instead of the oranges they were holding, exclaiming at Q12:31:

*"Gracious God! This is no mortal but a beautiful angel!"
(Q12:31)*

In other words, "we now understand why our hostess conceived such a passion for one we assumed to be just another Hebrew slave". In the Quran, God is also beautiful (Kermani 2015). The response to beauty is emotional and, of course, aesthetic but for that no less enlightening and soul-expanding than this or that syllogistic discourse. Did not Avicenna speak of a poetic syllogism (Schoeler 2013)?

Conclusion

In their stories there is truly a lesson for people of reason. This is not a tale invented, rather it is a confirmation of previous revelation, a detailed explanation of all things, a guide, and a mercy for people of faith (Q12:111).

Emotion and the metaphoricity it both generates and is generated by, has several functions with regard to the Quran and the reader's experience of it. Emotion helps – in fact is the only route – to grasping meaning ~~of~~ the word God: one “knows” the otherwise unknowable God through emotion; emotion then is a metaphor for approaching something unknowable or at the very least, unknown (Martin 2012, 863, 870). Also, one is indeed grasped by the Quran primarily emotionally through the heart mind: *fu'ād, qalb, ṣadr, lubb/albāb*. This ravishment is then another form of what might be called in a different situation “understanding” but in the case of the Quran such a word is far too feeble and pallid.

So much of the Quran is either explicitly concerned with emotion, whether God's or humans', that in some senses it is difficult to discern what is not emotional. The names and

attributes of God, as mentioned, such as wrathful (e.g. *dhu intiqām*, Q3:4; 5:95; 14:47; 39:37) or compassionate (*al-raḥīm*, *al-ra'ūf*) are either all words for those things we these days call feelings and emotions or, because their bearer is God they elicit an emotional response. In any case, the emotional profile of God as presented in the Quran reassures the believer that whatever the human might be feeling, it has meaning, even if it may take some thought and meditation to discover what such meaning may be. Again, metaphor. In addition, basic Quranic notions such as belief (*īmān*) or ingratitude, disbelief (*kufr*), happiness (*sa'āda*), hope for salvation and paradise or fear of perdition and hell point to emotion or state of soul. The Quran helps us develop a logic of emotion, something by which to control or at least understand what might otherwise represent a bewildering chaos of the inner life, and for which “Quranic therapy” provides healing and hope (Pandolfo 2018, esp. 221–352).

In drawing out a typological “conversation” between Joseph and the God of the Day of the Covenant the point is to demonstrate that the

originary spiritual, metaphorical, emotional and even normative mood of that primordial exchange may well be one of love, respect and gratitude as is evident in so much exegesis, poetry and even philosophy written by Muslims over the centuries.

Finally, and with reference to the Quran and the Sura of Joseph, perhaps the most important lesson here is the idea that emotions themselves can actually be seized, educated, controlled and mastered. The blurring of identity between God and Joseph throughout the sura but most explicitly in the bowing scenes at Q12:4 and Q12:100 suggest that the heart is the center of knowing and feeling. This is also the message of a much-loved and much-quoted statement, sometimes ascribed to the prophet Muhammad (d. 632) and sometimes to 'Ali (d. 661), the fourth Rightly-guided Caliph, of Sunni Islam and the first Imam of Shi'i Islam. This statement speaks directly to the noetic role of the heart and "emotion" and sheds light on their function in the Quran as means of perception, cognition and enlightenment. It seems fitting to close with it.

Our knowledge is terribly abstruse (sa'b mustas'ab). None can bear it except an angel brought near [the divine throne], a divinely sent prophet (nabī mursal) or a servant-lover ('abd) whose heart (qalb) God has made supple and receptive for faith through tests (Şaffār al-Qummī 2010, 383, my translation).

~~Among the most famous, or infamous depending on how one looks at him, of Makkī's students was the controversial Sufi thaumaturge Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922).[†] A very well-traveled figure, the sources clearly place Ḥallāj and his disciples in the Ḥaramayn, and it is perhaps telling that one of the charges which allowed his opponents in Baghdad to do away with him were accusations of his being a clandestine Qarmathian missionary plotting destruction of the Meccan sanctuary itself. Never one to disappoint his detractors, having made~~

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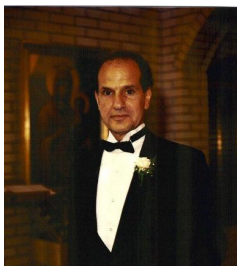
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