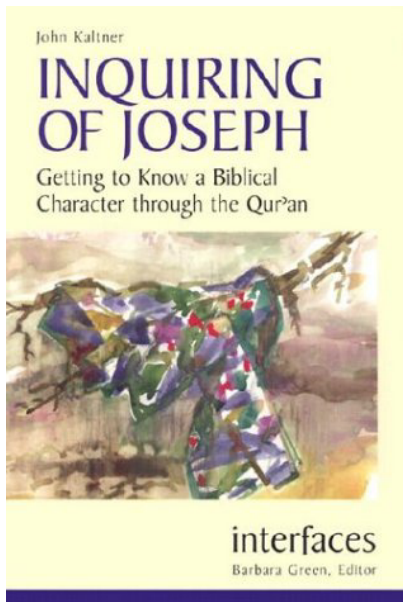


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Kaltner, John

Inquiring of Joseph: Getting to Know a Biblical Character through the Qur'an

Interfaces

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This inquiry into Joseph forms part of the series called Interfaces. The purpose is not to provide a text to students but rather to share some scholarly innovations with them, inviting the reader to “some fruitful collaborative learning adventures” (v). Each volume in the Interfaces series focuses on a biblical character. In this case, the focus is on Joseph, namely, an investigation into the character of Joseph according to the Bible and the Qur’an.

The book does not attempt to address the problem of religious diversity as such but rather tries to bring members of the monotheistic family together through a comparison of their sacred texts, thus introducing a “new way of reading and thinking” about their traditions. This is not a commentary in the sense of a word-by-word analysis and explanation of all the detail but rather a retelling of the story as portrayed in the Qur’an and the Hebrew Bible (no bibliography, only suggestions for further reading [131]). The focus is on the narrative and literary connections between the Qur’an and the Hebrew Bible. Thus Kaltner attempts to open the way for new perspectives regarding the impact of the Joseph story on its readers. Kaltner considers comparative analyses and narrative criticism, as well as rhetorical criticism (introduction), as the appropriate way of exploring some of these connections between the Qur’an and the Hebrew Bible. The Joseph story, chapter 12 in the Islamic text, comprises a single narrative, and the overall plot mirrors that of the

biblical version found in Gen 37–50. A comparative analysis allows these two versions to enter into dialogue with one another and enables the reader to recognize the differences but also to appreciate some features regarding the story that one might normally miss.

Kaltner identifies aspects of a typical narrative that he then uses to guide the reader through the story by comparing these elements as they occur in the Bible and the Qur'an: (1) how a story begins; (2) the narrator's role and characterization; (3) events and the use of time; (4) repetition; (5) gaps; and (6) how a story ends.

Both accounts introduce the reader to a “dysfunctional family unit” and expand on the underlying friction in the relationship between the characters of Jacob, Joseph, and his brothers, respectively, with an indication of the contributory tensions crucial to the story line (ch. 1). Paternal favoritism (Qur'an 12:8; Gen 37:3) provides an important dimension to the family relationships. An important rhetorical function not found in the biblical text (4) is the self-referential quality of the Qur'an (Qur'an 12:1–3). Stylistic features that underscore the oral tradition renders the Qur'an a book to be heard (2). Joseph eventually ends up in Egypt.

Chapter 2 serves to look at the way in which the text is constructed (23) and the way in which it is communicated to the reader, such as through direct and indirect characterization, repetition, and use of time. The setting for this narrative is the attempted seduction in Egypt (Gen 39:1–19; Qur'an 12:21–34). The conclusion to the event differs: in the Qur'an the wife is reprimanded, while in the Hebrew Bible Joseph is undeservedly thrown in jail. The Islamic text concludes the seduction scene with an affirmation and allusion to the relationship between Joseph and the deity. (Kaltner's conclusion that the Qur'an focuses more on Joseph and his relationship with the deity, the Bible more on Joseph and his relationship with Potiphar, is questionable. This relationship is regarded as the basic tenor that runs throughout the biblical narrative, even though it is not stated as explicitly as in certain sections of the Qur'an.)

In chapter 3 Kaltner investigates some “events,” such as Joseph and the encounter with the prisoners in Egypt (Gen 39:20–40:23; Qur'an 12:35–42), as important “blocks” that give structure to the narrative plot (45). An important dimension in the biblical account is “causality,” that is, interconnectedness between the different sections in a narrative, which explains why Kaltner regards Gen 39:20 as the starting point for this section instead of Gen 40:1. As with the previous examples, the Qur'an presents the material in a rather abbreviated format, lacking the same “causality.” Kaltner regards the “lack of a theological component” or any “explicitly theological material” in the biblical account as a distinctive difference (59)—despite the explicit reference to the presence of God in Gen 39:21!

In chapter 4 Kaltner examines the different functions of repetition, one of the most common literary devices found in the Hebrew Bible (Gen 41:1–45; Qur’an 12:43–57). In the Qur’an it “contributes to the construction of a portrait” that paints Joseph “in glowing terms” as one of “the good ones” (269), whereas the “biblical account highlights Pharaoh and what the deity will do for him” (69). The narrative plot unfolds, with the biblical account more detailed than the Qur’an (Gen 42:1–44:17; Qur’an 12:58–86), until the point where Joseph reveals his true identity (ch. 5). Gaps in the story prevent the reader from knowing Joseph’s thoughts. Noticeable is the “concentration of theological language” in the Qur’an, whereas the “biblical account does not have such a strong theological element” (102).

In chapter 6 Kaltner emphasizes the importance of the conclusion (Gen 44:18–50:21; Qur’an 12:87–101) of the story. The concentric arrangement of the stories enables the reader to be more attentive to the differences. In the biblical account, the story ends in Egypt, and Joseph sees the hand of God in sending him to Egypt, where the families meet again, but only the “Islamic family is truly united” (127). Why the genealogical material (death notices; i.e., Gen 50:22–26) that forms such an important link throughout the patriarchal literature does not receive the attention that one might expect if the focus is on the *final* text is left unexplained.

Kaltner addresses an important dimension with regard to the relationship between the monotheistic religions. The need to put this more firmly on the agenda is clear, if some recent trends with regard to the relationship between the Islamic world and the West are taken into consideration (Iraq, Palestine, the headscarf debate in France, etc). Socioeconomic and political developments in South Africa will also necessitate a change with regard to the position of the different religions in South Africa, where most biblical scholars are unfamiliar with the contents of the Qur’an. In addition, in terms of biblical scholarship the demise of historical criticism introduces a methodology-conscious moment to African biblical scholarship that surely bodes well for the debate.

Although the book is aimed at the undergraduate level specifically, there are a number of questions that forces one to ask: What is the rhetorical intention of the author? Kaltner’s view with regard to what constitutes a “theological component” is most troubling. An explicit reference to God, or the absence of such an explicit or direct statement, does surely not imply that the biblical account lacks a “theological component” (9). Kaltner allows the so-called theological spiritual character of the Qur’an to influence his explanation of the theological contents of the Hebrew Bible, namely, concerning the presence/absence of the deity in Genesis, and in this respect the “divine character remains flat and undeveloped” (43). Is it perhaps Kaltner’s acceptance of the “self-referential quality” of the Qur’an that leads him to conclude that the Qur’an has a very clear

theological agenda, whereas the “biblical account does not have such a strong theological element” (102)? In view of the emphasis on the final text, the selective way of arguing contradicts the intention of the author and creates the impression of a forced argument. Although the qur’anic parallel (Qur’an 12:4–6; Gen 37:3–11) does not mention paternal favoritism, it is explicitly stated in 12:8 that Joseph and his brother were loved more than the other brothers by their father. Kaltner’s argument that the Islamic text “makes no mention of the paternal favoritism” (8) is not convincing. Is Joseph presented as an innocent victim throughout the Genesis account (60), or is he partly to blame for his circumstances (11)? Like their Islamic counterparts (125), the brothers admitted their guilt, indeed not immediately to Joseph but to one another (Gen 42:21, but see also 50:17–21)! In view of the emphasis on reconciliation and reunion in Gen 45 and the reconfirmation thereof in Gen 50:15–21, Kaltner’s suggestion that only the “Islamic family is truly united” is not convincing and again creates the impression of a forced argument. So also is the reference to Jacob’s apparent lack of faith in the Hebrew Bible (18). The fact that it is not so explicitly stated, in proximity to the qur’anic parallel, does not turn it into a “typical characteristic” of Jacob. The theological thrust of the patriarchal narrative is to portray God as the God of the fathers who is with them and their descendants, although they might not always be aware of this. The deity’s involvement is not stated as explicitly—and it is exactly therein that the text calls for the reader to become involved in the inquiry.

Despite these concerns, among others, a focus on the similarities and differences between the Bible and the Qur’an presents an opportunity for dialogue between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (xiii). It simultaneously sensitizes the reader to certain distinct narrative features in the two accounts (i.e., reference to Satan in the Qur’an, the apparent ignorance of Jacob or his lack of knowledge with regard to the whereabouts of his sons in the Hebrew Bible) and calls for further investigation in this regard. Of value is that this dialogue takes the foundational documents as points of departure, particularly in a South African context where readers of the Hebrew Bible are looking for new ways of reading the biblical text that moves beyond the historical descriptive. However, in so doing a comparison of the two accounts would still need to respect the formation and shape of the respective traditions. Although the Qur’an can be looked upon as a body of “biblical affiliated material,” that is, material from a context that is “culturally, chronologically and theologically” not that far removed from the Hebrew Bible (xii), the acknowledgement that these texts differ in terms of their respective formation, composition, and historical contexts (origin) should be taken more seriously (129).