The Accusation of Joseph by Potiphar's Wife is Told in the First Book of the Bible, Genesis, Chapter 39. How Does this Story Differ from that Told by the Persian Poet, Jami in the 15th Century?

Chapter 39 of the Book of Genesis of the Bible tells us the story of Joseph and Potiphar's Wife. This story also appears in the Quran, as Surah Yusuf, which formed the basis for Jami's epic poem "Yusuf and Zulaikha". The basis of the storyline is the same, however Chapter 39 is from the Bible, a holy text, whereas Yusuf and Zulaikha by Jami is a fictional tale based off a Quranic text, and therefore the author takes more creative liberties. While the motivation of the characters to devote themselves to the divine is shared by each text, they differ in the manner in which they reach such devotion.

The life of Joseph is recounted in Genesis, and this chapter starts with Joseph as a young adult who has been abandoned in a well by his jealous brothers and captured by a group of passing Ishmaelites. The chapter opens with Joseph arriving in Egypt and being bought as a slave by Potiphar, "an Egyptian who was one of the Pharoah's officials, the captain of the guard" (Holy Bible New International Version, 1979). Potiphar soon sees that "the Lord was with Joseph" and therefore "Joseph found favour in his eyes" (Holy Bible New International Version, 1979) and Potiphar appoints him as his attendant – a word which used to mean something similar to head of operations or chief executive officer, rather than butler or servant (Perry, 2016). Joseph is described as "well-built and handsome" and catches the eye of Potiphar's wife – who is unnamed. She tells Joseph to come to bed with her, but he refuses, out of respect for his master. Potiphar's wife accuses Joseph of attacking her and attempting to sleep with her, which results in Joseph being imprisoned. However, his time in prison introduces him to the Pharoah's cupbearer, who tells the Pharoah about Joseph's gift of dream interpretation, resulting in his release after 2 years and appointment as his advisor.

Jami's version is a fictional retelling of Surah Yusuf in the Quran, and it focusses just as much on the life and character of Zulaikha (Potiphar's wife) as it does on Joseph – known in this poem as Yusuf. The poem gives the same background for Yusuf's childhood and adolescence as the Bible, however, it also tells the story of Zulaikha's childhood. She described as an incredibly beautiful princess of Mauritania; "His [the king's] child Zulaikha was passing fair, / None in his heart might with her compare; / Of his royal house the most brilliant star, / A gem from the chest where the treasures are." (Griffiths, 1882). Zulaikha possesses the same dream interpreting gift as Yusuf and dreams of marrying a man of great beauty and strength. However, her father marries her to Potiphar, an Egyptian general. Zulaikha is unhappy in her marriage, until she sees Yusuf at the slave market and begs Potiphar to buy him. She falls madly in love with Yusuf, and eventually asks him to sleep with her, but he rejects her out of loyalty to his master. She bursts into tears and rips a piece from the front

of his shirt. Out of spite, she tells her husband that Yusuf came to attack her in her sleep but was startled when she awoke, and as he ran, she grabbed his shirt and a piece ripped off in her hand, which she uses as proof of the attack. Potiphar becomes angry and throws Yusuf in prison. However, a young baby suddenly begins to speak and tells Potiphar to check whether the ripped piece is from the front or back of his shirt – if it is from the front, he is guilty, but if it is from the back, he is innocent. Indeed, it was from the front, and thus Potiphar released Yusuf. However, Zulaikha cannot stand to live with Yusuf if she cannot love him, so she imprisons him herself. Due to her immense guilt, she prematurely ages, is widowed, and goes blind. She retreats to a cottage she has built from reeds and worships an idol. Yusuf is eventually released from prison by the Pharoah for telling his dream, and he finds Zulaikha. She smashes the idol and devotes herself to Allah, upon Yusuf's instruction. Her youth and beauty are miraculously restored, they marry, and live happily ever after. Jami's retelling of the story teaches us that patience, devotion, and piety are the keys to finding love.

While the characters in both texts are driven by the theme of devotion to the divine, they differ in the paths taken to reach this goal. The Biblical telling teaches the reader that devotion and loyalty to G-d will result in prosperity, luck, and success. Joseph experiences some particularly difficult situations, such as being bought as a slave and accused of sexual assault. However, after each difficulty he faced, the phrase "the Lord was with [Joseph]" is written and Joseph gets some sort of relief in his situation. For example, Joseph resists the "sin against [G-d]" of temptation and adultery by rejecting Potiphar's wife and then "Joseph's master [ ] put him in prison[.] But while Joseph was there[,] the Lord was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favour in the eyes of the prison warder." (Holy Bible New International Version, 1979). Here we see Joseph's devotion to G-d being rewarded with a tangible, real world experience, showing the presence of G-d on earth as well as heaven. Throughout the chapter, the writer reminds us that "the Lord was with [Joseph]", thus teaching the reader G-d's[1] omnipresence fosters prosperity and survival despite trying times, in exchange for loyalty. This is also seen when Joseph rejects Potiphar's wife and says "My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against [G-d]?". We see Joseph has expressed loyalty to Potiphar, as he believes that committing adultery with Potiphar's wife would be an unkind thing to do to Potiphar. However, he says that the sin is against G-d, not Potiphar, and therefore his loyalty is ultimately to G-d (Perry, 2016).

In Jami's poem, Yusuf and Zulaikha's love is not only a gift from G-d, but a manifestation of G-d himself, and Zulaikha's journey to loving Yusuf is symbolic of the journey one must take to love G-d (Merguerian & Najmabadi, 1997). Jami, as a Sufi mystic, believed in dissolution of the self in order to unite with the transcendent Absolute. This indicates from the beginning how intrinsic beauty and love are to

[1] My preferred spelling.

reaching “union with the Absolute”. Sufism teaches that the physical world is but a bride to reaching the Absolute, and in this poem, love acts as a vector for crossing this bridge, while beauty acts as a veil to the Absolute (Beutel, 1997). Therefore, in Jami’s poem, Jami frequently uses the superlative in his descriptions of Yusuf and Zulaikha, which is representative the Sufi aim to unite with the Absolute. For example, in Speech he describes Yusuf as “No darling ever was like Yusuf fair, / In peerless beauty far beyond compare.” and when describing Zulaikha, he writes “She never turned from love's true path aside, / But, born to love, in love she lived and died.” (Griffiths, 1882). By describing them in absolute terms, they are immediately on the path to uniting with the Absolute. At the end of the poem, when Zulaikha has become very old and blind and is living as a recluse in the cottage of reeds, she has also turned to worshipping an idol image carved in stone and prays to it to have her sight restored. This physical manifestation of her desires acts as a barrier to reaching unity with the Absolute, but once it has been destroyed, she prays to G-d and her youth and beauty is restored. Jami uses this to illustrate the importance of two things. The first is to not attach oneself too strongly to earthly manifestations like prosperity or adversity, as they are simply temporary and shall pass with time. The second is to prioritise walking the path of the Absolute and devotion to G-d over prayer to idols. Zulaikha’s devotion to loving Yusuf, however, is rewarded with Yusuf’s reciprocation of this love and she finally reaches unity with the Absolute, symbolised by union to Yusuf in marriage (Beutel, 1997).

While Chapter 39 of Genesis in the Bible and Jami’s poem Yusuf and Zulaikha share the same core storyline, they differ in overall content. The Bible is a holy text, and therefore Genesis was written to be read by believers of the faith and aims to teach the reader something about the nature of G-d, through the experiences of those who have followed a holy path. The Bible uses non-fictional experiences to demonstrate religious experiences. However, Yusuf and Zulaikha is a fictional poem based off the Quranic Surah Yusuf, and therefore Jami uses his creative freedom to expand the untold story of Zulaikha and adds a different ending to the story than both the Quranic and Biblical version. The characters in both versions of the story aim to reach true divine devotion, however they take vastly different paths to reach this. In the Bible, Joseph is rewarded by G-d throughout the chapter for his on-going devotion and the reader learns that constant loyalty to G-d is rewarded with prosperity. However, Jami teaches the reader the Sufi belief that devotion to G-d has the final reward of unity with the Absolute. I believe that regardless of faith, everyone can take away important lessons from these texts.

1638 words

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