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Why Did the Egyptian Noblewomen Cut Their Hands? Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī's Interpretation of Qur'ān 12:31

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Abstract: Sūra 12 of the Qur'ān, *Joseph*, tells the story of the prophet Joseph. He is bought as a slave by an Egyptian high official, whose wife—tradition calls her Zulaykhā—makes an unsuccessful attempt to seduce him, and is ridiculed by her peers for her failure to do so. She invites them to a banquet, hands them knives, and presents Joseph before them. Upon seeing him, the women cut their hands with the knives they are holding (Qur'ān 12:31). According to the generally accepted exegetical view, they do so because they were so awestruck by Joseph's beauty that they did not know what they were doing and accidentally cut their hands while thinking that they were cutting some food item, like fruit. Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī differs from this view. He argues that the women wished to succeed where Zulaykhā had failed, and, unable to persuade Joseph in the beginning, they threatened to kill themselves if Joseph would not listen to them, and, to convince Joseph that they were serious in carrying out the threat, they deliberately cut their hands with knives. This article gives details of Iṣlāḥī's interpretation of the Qur'ānic verse in question and discusses how that interpretation calls for re-evaluating some crucial aspects of the Qur'ānic story of Joseph.

Keywords: Qur'ān; Qur'ānic exegesis; Iṣlāḥī; Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī; Joseph; Zulaykhā; Potiphar's wife; Egyptian noblewomen



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1. The Problem Stated

In Sūra 12, which tells the story of Joseph, verses 23–29 relate how the wife of the Egyptian high official called 'Azīz (Potiphar of the Bible)—following tradition, we will call her Zulaykhā—makes an unsuccessful attempt to seduce him, whereupon some women in the city, very likely her peers, ridicule her, saying that “It is clear to us that she has gone astray” (*innā la-narāhā fī ḍalālīn mubīnīn* [verse 30]).¹ A series of events follow (verses 30–34)²:

Zulaykhā arranges a banquet, to which she invites those women;

she hands each guest a knife;

Joseph is presented before the women;

the women are stunned by Joseph's beauty, cut their hands, and exclaim that Joseph is not a mortal human but an angel;

Zulaykhā, feeling vindicated before the women, says that Joseph will either do her wish or be imprisoned and humiliated;

Joseph prays to God for protection against the women's machinations, and God grants his prayer.

This Qur'ānic passage (verses 30–34)—indeed, the whole of the sūra—raises, besides the issues of interpretation of the incident of the women's cutting of their hands, a number of general and specific issues.³ But our particular point of interest, to which we will confine our discussion, is, Why did the women cut their hands with the knives that Zulaykhā had provided them?

2. Traditional Muslim Interpretation of Qur'ān 12:31

The generally accepted answer to the question just posed is that the women were “stunned by his [Joseph’s] beauty.” According to some interpreters, the women, dazzled by Joseph’s beauty, thought that they were using knives to cut some food item, like fruit, but accidentally cut their hands. Others leave the food item out and simply say that the women, awestruck by Joseph’s beauty, cut their hands. But the difference between the two positions is only one of detail, both representing the same essential interpretation, namely, that the women’s cutting of their hands was an involuntary act on their part, a position accepted by most classical and modern, Sunnī and Shī‘ī, *mufasssirūn* (“Qur’ānic exegetes”), such as the following:

‘Abdallāh ibn ‘Abbās (d. 686–7). ([Ibn ‘Abbās 1987](#), p. 196); Abū l-Ḥajjāj Mujaḥhid ibn Jabr al-Qurashī (d. 722) ([Mujāhid 2005](#), p. 117). Abū l-Ḥasan Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 767) ([Muqātil 2003](#), 2:147); Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) ([Ṭabarī 1909](#), 12:122); Abū l-Layth al-Samarqandī (d. 983) ([Samarqandī 1993](#), 2:159–160); Abū Ishāq al-Tha‘labī (d. 1035) ([Tha‘labī 2004](#), 3:372); Maḥmūd ibn ‘Umar al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1144) ([Zamakhsharī n.d.](#), 2:253.); Ibn ‘Aṭīyya al-Andalusī (d. 1147) ([Ibn ‘Aṭīyya 2007](#), 3:239); Abū ‘Alī al-Faḍl ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabarsī (d. 1153) ([Ṭabarsī 2006](#), 5:307); Abū l-Faraj ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Alī ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1200) ([Ibn al-Jawzī 2002](#), 4:167); Fakhr al-Dīn Abū ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad ibn ‘Umar al-Rāzī (d. 1210) ([Rāzī 1938](#), 18:126–127); Abū ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī (d. 1272) ([Qurṭubī 1967](#), 9:179–180); ‘Abdallāh ibn ‘Umar al-Bayḍāwī (d. 1286) ([Bayḍāwī 1968](#), 1:493); Abū Hayyān al-Gharnāṭī (d. 1344) ([Abū Hayyān 1992](#), 6:267–269); ‘Imād al-Dīn Ismā‘īl ibn Kathīr (d. 1373) ([Ibn Kathīr 1983](#), 4:23–24); Burhān al-Dīn Abū l-Ḥasan ibn ‘Umar al-Biqā‘ī (d. 1480) ([Biqā‘ī 2003](#), 4:34–35); Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī ibn Muḥammad al-Shawkānī (d. 1834) ([Shawkānī 1996](#), 3:26); Abū l-Thanā’ Maḥmūd al-Ālūsī (d. 1854) ([Ālūsī, 13:229–230](#)); Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) ([Rashīd Riḍā n.d.](#), 12:293); Muḥammad Thanā’ ullaḥ al-Mazharī al-Pānīpatī (d. 1810) ([Thanā’ ullaḥ al-Pānīpatī 2007](#), 4:24); Abū Muḥammad ‘Abdu’l-Ḥaqq Haqqānī (d. 1911) ([Haqqānī n.d.](#), 4:262); Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir ibn ‘Āshūr (d. 1973) ([Ibn ‘Āshūr 1984](#), 12:263); Ashraf ‘Alī Thānawī (d. 1943) ([Thānawī 1935](#), 5:78); Muḥammad Shafī‘ (d. 1976) ([Muḥammad Shafī‘ 1990](#), 5:50); Abū l-A‘lā Mawḍūdī (d. 1979) ([Mawḍūdī 1949–1972a](#), [Mawḍūdī 1949–1972b](#), 2:397);⁴ Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabā‘ī (d. 1982) ([Ṭabāṭabā‘ī 2002](#), 12:149).

This is not an exhaustive list of the *mufasssirūn* who subscribe to the above-stated standard interpretation of verse 31 of sūra 12. It is a fairly representative list, though, and should suffice to show that the said interpretation has practically the whole weight of the exegetical tradition behind it.

3. Iṣlāḥī’s Interpretation

The Pakistani Qur’ānic exegete, Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī (d. 1418/1997), in his multivolume Urdu Qur’ānic commentary, *Tadabbur-i Qur’ān* (“Reflection on the Qur’ān”), differs from—or rather, rejects—the aforesaid interpretation and presents his own understanding of the verse ([Iṣlāḥī 2001–2002](#), 4:208–210). Here, following, is his argument step by step:

1. In verse 30, the women, criticizing Zulaykhā, say: *innā la-narāha fī ḍalālīn mubīnīn* “It is clear to us that she has gone astray!” This statement, says Iṣlāḥī, combines the elements of *malāma*, *shamāta*, and *iddi‘ā’*,⁵ that is, of reproach, malicious pleasure or schadenfreude, and boastful claim, respectively: reproach, in that it is quite strange, in their view, that the wife of a high-ranking official should fall in love with her slave—and stranger still, that she should fail to make him do her wish; malicious pleasure, in that she, like them a noblewoman, should suffer defeat at the hands of a slave and, as a result, incur disgrace; and boastful claim, in that, had they been in her

- place, the women imply, they would have delivered, with their beauty, smooth talk, and blandishments, a knock-out blow to Joseph.
2. The next verse (31) begins with *fa-lammā sami‘at bi-makrihinna*, “When she [Zulaykhā] heard of their *makr*” [my translation]. What is meant by *makr*? Since one of the elements of the women’s just-quoted statement is boastful claim, the word *makr* in this verse would signify something like ruse, a deceitful act that, the women are sure, will succeed where Zulaykhā’s charms have failed. In other words, *makr* is the instrument the women intend to use to flesh out their *iddi‘ā*; through *makr* they will bring Joseph round.
 3. When Joseph steps out before them, the women are dazzled by his beauty. Upon seeing him, furthermore, they sense that it would not be easy to bring him round. But they had come with the intention and the plan to tame him, and so they try to persuade him. Joseph, of course, would not budge. At this, the women threaten to kill themselves if Joseph would not listen to them. Joseph stands firm, and, finally, the women, giving up, say, *hāsha li-llāhi mā hādhā basharan in hādhā illā malakun karīmun* (“Great God! He cannot be mortal! He must be a precious angel!”).
 4. What is the basis for the view that the women tried to persuade Joseph to do their wish and that their act of cutting their hands was a *kayd*, a stratagem, on their part? The basis, says Iṣlāhī, is found in the Qur’ān itself. In verses 50–51, Joseph, still in prison, refuses to accompany the king’s messenger to the king and sends the messenger back, demanding that the king first question the women about their scheming behavior at the banquet: *wa-qālal-maliku ‘tūnī bihī fa-lammā jā’ ahū r-rasūlu qāla rjt’ ilā rabbika fa-s’ alhu mā bālu n-niswati llatī qaṭṭa’ na aydiyahunna inna rabbī bi-kaydihinna’ alīmun qāla mā khaṭbukunna idh rāwadtunna Yūsufu’ an nafsihī* The king said, “Bring him to me,” but when the messenger came to fetch Joseph, he said, “Go back to your master and ask him about what happened to those women who cut their hands—my Lord knows all about their machinations.” The king asked the women, “What happened when you tried to seduce Joseph?” In these verses, Joseph, in his remarks about the women, calls the women’s cutting of their hands a *kayd*, namely, a wily maneuver to persuade Joseph to do their wish. The king, too, speaks of the women’s attempted seduction of Joseph. He uses the word *rāwadtunna* (“you tried to seduce”), from the root *r-w-d*, which, in other Form III derivatives, occurs several times in the sūra (verses 24, 26, 30, 32, 51 (twice in 51) with reference to Zulaykhā and the other women.⁶ Had the women cut their hands accidentally, as a result of being overwhelmed by Joseph’s beauty and without realizing that they were cutting their own hands, Joseph would not have called it a *kayd*. And had the women not tried to ensnare Joseph, the king would not have asked them, *ma khaṭbukunna idh rāwadtunna Yūsufu’ an nafsihī*. To Iṣlāhī, verses 50–51 make it abundantly clear that the women were both complicit and in competition—that they were not simply innocent guests of Zulaykhā who were dazzled by Joseph’s beauty, but actually intended to try their wiles on Joseph, hoping, to Zulaykhā’s chagrin, to succeed where she had failed.
 5. The threat to commit suicide is one of the most effective weapons a woman can use in her confrontation with a man. If she finds that her blandishments are not working, she uses the threat of suicide as her last weapon, and this is what those women did. In fact, Iṣlāhī adds, the threat to commit suicide is the last weapon used by all weak people, not just women.⁷
 6. After their failed attempt to win Joseph over, the women admit defeat and say: *hāsha li llāhi mā hādhā basharan in hādhā illā malakun karīmun*. *Hāsha li llāhi* is an expression used by one to clear oneself or someone else of an accusation. The complete statement by the women is, on the one hand, the highest praise Joseph could receive, and, on the other, an excuse for their failure, in that they have failed not because they were not attractive enough or their lures did not work on Joseph, but because the person they were confronting was an angelic figure, their charms being effective only against mortal human beings.⁸

As can be seen, Iṣlāḥī's interpretation of verse 31 and the other relevant verses is based on a close reading of the Qur'ānic text. Iṣlāḥī does not cite or discuss any *riwāyāt* (transmitted reports) about the incident involving Joseph, Zulaykhā, and the other women; rather, he aims at arriving at a coherent understanding of the Qur'ānic text by focusing on the text itself, trying to reconstruct the happenings in the sūra. In doing so, he, on the one hand, takes into consideration not only the dictionary meanings but also the nuances and connotations of the words and expressions used by the speakers, and, on the other, analyzes the psychology and mood of the speakers. A good example is his quite plausible statement that the Egyptian women's criticism of Zulaykhā contains the elements of *malāmā*, *shamāta*, and *iddi'ā'* (see above). It is easy to see how the women's *malāmā* would be intermixed with *shamāta*. But the fact that Zulaykhā's failure to bring Joseph round does not deter the women from trying their own charms on Joseph is clearly suggestive of their *iddi'ā'* or boastful pretensions as well.

4. The Difference Iṣlāḥī's Interpretation Makes

What difference does Iṣlāḥī's interpretation of Qur'ān 12:31 make? Several points may be made:

1. In the traditional interpretation, the Egyptian noblewomen are a sort of foil or sidekick to Zulaykhā and can hardly be called major actors or figures in the Qur'ānic story of Joseph. On Iṣlāḥī's interpretation, they are no longer passive, if deeply interested, spectators of a drama unfolding before their eyes. They assume an active role in advancing the story's plot since they now become Zulaykhā's accomplices, and even competitors: they plot along with Zulaykhā in trapping Joseph—and they hope to succeed where Zulaykhā has failed. In brief, Iṣlāḥī's interpretation moves the women from a footnote to the main text.
2. The women's conduct, taken in conjunction with Zulaykhā's conduct, becomes a sharper indictment of the decadent moral state of Egyptian nobility than Zulaykhā's conduct by itself would be. It indicates that the whole crate of apples, and not just one apple, was bad, or that, to borrow Shakespeare's words, much was rotten in the state of Denmark. And it also indicates, in stronger terms, the challenge Joseph faced and the strength of character he possessed: he was under assault not just from one side, but from all sides, and his successful defense of himself against all those attacks raises his moral stature in the same degree.⁹
3. Iṣlāḥī's interpretation calls for revisiting some of the expressions used in the Qur'ānic passage under discussion:
 - a. In the traditional interpretation, the word *makr*, as used by the women, is explained as (1) the women's *ighṭiyāb* and *sū' u l-qāla*, that is, their maligning of Zulaykhā in her absence;¹⁰ (2) the women's *iḥṭiyāl*, or wily tactic, to get Zulaykhā to show Joseph to them;¹¹ or (3) the women's *ifshā' al-sirr*, that is, their divulging of the secret Zulaykhā had entrusted them with, namely, that she was in love with her slave, Joseph.¹² But, strictly speaking, none of these three meanings belongs to the word *makr*, and none of them can be attested from Qur'ānic usage. The Qur'ān uses the word *makr* predominantly to mean a secret stratagem intended to cause harm of some kind. Iṣlāḥī's interpretation assigns to the word a meaning much closer to its spirit.
 - b. In the traditional interpretation, the word *kayd* does not seem to have much of a presence in the text. In Iṣlāḥī's interpretation, it assumes key importance, serving as a basis for Joseph's indictment of the women: *inna rabbī bi-kaydihinna 'alīmun* (verse 50). When, in the very next verse, the king questions the women, he quite rightly uses the word *rāwadtunna* to interpret the word *kayd* used by Joseph, evidence that Joseph's use of the word *kayd* in verse 33 (*wa-illā taṣrif*

- ‘annī kaydahunna*, “if you do not protect me from their machinations”) likewise refers to the sexual advances the women made to Joseph.
- c. In the traditional interpretation, the phrase *qaṭṭa‘na aydiyahunna* refers to an involuntary act on the women’s part. But an involuntary act can hardly serve as a basis for the king to hold the women accountable. In verse 50, an imprisoned Joseph tells the king’s messenger to go back to the king and ask him to investigate why the women had cut their hands, indicating in the same breath that that act was a *kayd*. His words are, *irji‘ ilā rabbika fa-s’ alhu mā bālu n-niswati llatī qaṭṭa‘na aydiyahunna inna rabbī bi-kaydihinna ‘alīmun* (“Go back to your master and ask him about those women who cut their hands—my Lord knows all about their machinations”), and, in the next verse, the king rephrases Joseph’s question, interpreting it, with the Qur’ān approving the interpretation, as *mā khaṭbukunna idh rāwadtunn Yūsufu ‘an nafsihī* (“What happened when you tried to seduce Joseph?”). His question is about three things—the cutting of hands, the *kayd*, and the *murāwada* (*maṣdar* of the Form III verb *rāwada*), which are integrally connected: the women’s *kayd* consisted in their cutting of their hands, which was intended to persuade Joseph to do their wish (*murāwada*).
 - d. Iṣlāḥī’s interpretation raises the interesting question of the relationship between the words *makr* and *kayd* as used in the Qur’ānic text in the sūra. It seems that, in this sūra at least, *makr* stands for hatching a plot, whereas *kayd* stands for executing that plot in practice. Some of the other instances of the Qur’ānic use of the two words would seem to support this differentiation.
 - e. The second half of verse 31 runs as follows: *fa-lammā ra’ aynahū akbarnahū wa-qaṭṭa‘na aydiyahunna wa-qulna hāsha li-llāhi mā hādḥā basharan in hādḥā illā malakun karīmun*, “and when the women saw him, they were stunned by his beauty, and cut their hands, exclaiming, ‘Great God! He cannot be a mortal! He must be a precious angel!’” As can be seen, the verse reports three things:
 - (1) upon seeing Joseph, the woman are stunned by his beauty;
 - (2) the women cut their hands;
 - (3) the women declare that Joseph is no ordinary mortal but an angel.

On the traditional interpretation, the three things take place in quick succession and together make up a single, uninterrupted sequence, as is clear from Abdel Haleem’s translation. On Iṣlāḥī’s interpretation, however, there is a time lapse between (1) and (2) and very possibly between (2) and (3) as well. (1) represents the women’s spontaneous reaction upon first catching sight of Joseph. After they have overcome their unrehearsed initial reaction, they consciously try their wiles on Joseph. When Joseph is unmoved, the women threaten to commit suicide if Joseph would not do their wish, and, to convince Joseph of the seriousness of their intent, they cut their hands. Upon seeing that Joseph is still unmoved, they give up, and exclaim that Joseph, with his chaste character, is more like an angel than a mortal human being.

5. The Merit of Iṣlāḥī’s Interpretation and the Significance of the Knives

Iṣlāḥī’s interpretation of Qur’ān 12:31, with its exclusive focus on the Qur’ānic text—that is, on the context, intratextuality, and language of the Qur’ān—challenges a very well-established interpretation and seeks to replace it with a more nuanced understanding of the Qur’ānic text. Its particular merit is that it casts the Egyptian noblewomen in a new light, assigning them a much more active role in the story than they have in the traditional interpretation.

There is one more point to consider. Iṣlāḥī’s interpretation of Qur’ān 12:31 is possibly reinforced by another datum in the sūra—that of Zulaykhā’s handing of knives to the women. We need to keep in mind that it is not the Qur’ān’s wont to mention a detail of this kind, and so there has to be a reason why the Qur’ān would provide such a detail in

the sūra. When I read about Zulaykhā, *wa-ātat kulla wāḥidatin minhunna sikkīnan*, “[and she gave] each of them a knife,” I get the feeling that this was done in accordance with a preconceived plan: the women had apprised Zulaykhā of their intention to go to any length to persuade Joseph, even to the extent of threatening him with suicide if he were to remain firm in the face of their demand. Accordingly, to demonstrate to Joseph, if necessary, that they were serious in carrying out their threat, they themselves had asked Zulaykhā to provide them with knives at the banquet, and that is why the Qur’ān highlights an otherwise inconsequential detail.

6. An Extra-Biblical Analogue to Qur’ān 12:31

The Qur’ānic story of Joseph has a number of Biblical analogues, but there is no mention in Genesis 39:6–20, which reports Potiphar’s wife’s interaction with Joseph, of the incident involving her invitation to Egyptian women to a banquet, nor, consequently, of her handing of knives to the invited guests. The incident is, however, found in some extra-Biblical sources. In his *Legends of the Bible*, Louis Ginzberg relates that, when asked by “all the women of Egypt” why she was so distraught, Zulaykhā decided to answer them through practical demonstration”:

She commanded her maid-servants to prepare food for all the women, and she spread a banquet before them in her house. She placed knives upon the table to peel the oranges, and then ordered Joseph to appear, arrayed in costly garments, and wait upon her guests. When Joseph came in, the women could not take their eyes off him, and they all cut their hands with the knives, and the oranges in their hands were covered with blood, but they, not knowing what they were doing, continued to look upon the beauty of Joseph without turning their eyes away from him (Ginzberg 1975, pp. 217–18)

As will be noted, this account is very similar to the traditional Muslim Qur’ānic exegetical account of what happened between Joseph and Zulaykhā. One might ask why it did not become part of the Biblical canon, but any attempt to answer that question will raise a host of questions with regard to the redactional history of the Bible and will in any case be speculative in nature? One is also tempted to ask, in the present context: Can the incident of the women’s cutting of their hands, as reported by Ginzberg, be read along the lines proposed by Iṣlāḥī in his exegesis of Qur’ān 12:31? The answer to this question must be in the negative since the linguistic resources exploited by Iṣlāḥī for critiquing the traditional Muslim interpretation of Qur’ān 12:31 are to be found in the Qur’ān itself, whereas no such resources are to be found either in the above-quoted Ginzberg’s account or in his more extensive treatment of the Joseph story at large. Iṣlāḥī has shown that the Qur’ān’s strategic use of the words *kayd* and *māk* turns the women’s act of cutting their hands into a ploy or guile they used in their attempt to tame Joseph. On Iṣlāḥī’s interpretation of Qur’ān 12:31, then, there is only a surface resemblance between the Qur’ānic and extra-Biblical accounts of the women’s act of cutting their hands, the two accounts differing considerably with regard to the meaning and significance of that act.

7. The Larger Context of Iṣlāḥī’s Exegetical Methodology

Iṣlāḥī’s exegesis of Qur’ān 12:31—and, by clear implication, his rejection of the traditional exegesis of the verse—is cogently argued. It remains to point out that the line of argument taken by him proceeds from his exegetical methodology, whose principles he took over from his teacher, Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Farāhī (d. 1930), an unusually gifted, though not yet widely known, Qur’ānic scholar whose unfinished project of writing a complete commentary on the Qur’ān in light of those principles was completed by Iṣlāḥī. I have explained that methodology in *Coherence in the Qur’ān* (Mir 1986). The key methodological principle in the Farāhī–Iṣlāḥī approach to the Qur’ān is that of *naẓm* (literally, “order,

organization, system”), which stipulates that the Qur’ān is, at several interconnected levels, marked by a very high degree of organic unity. The importance of that principle is driven home when we remember that the dominant mode of historical Qur’ānic exegesis has throughout history been atomistic, which is to say that most Muslim exegetes take a verse-by-verse approach to the Qur’ān and are seldom concerned with seeing the Qur’ānic sūra, for example, as a unified discourse. Iṣlāḥī interprets the entire Qur’ān in light of the principles laid down by his teacher, often producing exegetical results that are novel and yet quite faithful to the Qur’ānic text, his interpretation of Qur’ān 12:31 being one example of such novel but highly plausible interpretation. All of this goes to show that the Qur’ān, notwithstanding its rich fourteen-centuries-long exegetical history, can still be read in new ways and mined for new insights.

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Notes

- ¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at a Qur’ān conference held at SOAS, University of London, in November 2013. Unless otherwise indicated, the translation of the Qur’ānic verses cited in this article is from M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (2005) (see also next note on the translation of the Arabic word *kayd*). I would like to express my gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments.
- ² Here, following, is the passage in Abdel Haleem’s translation (I have replaced his translation of *kayd* as “treachery” in verses 33 and 34—and later in the paper in verse 50—with “machinations”):
³⁰Some women of the city said, “The governor’s wife is trying to seduce her slave! Love for him consumes her heart! It is clear to us that she has gone astray!” ³¹When she heard their malicious talk, she prepared a banquet and sent for them, giving each of them a knife. ³²She said to Joseph, “Come out and show yourself to them!” And when the women saw him, they were stunned by his beauty, and cut their hands, exclaiming, “Great God! He cannot be mortal! He must be a precious angel!” She said, “This is the one you blamed me for. I tried to seduce him and he wanted to remain chaste, but if he does not do what I command now, he will be put in prison and degraded.” ³³Joseph said, “My Lord! I would prefer prison to what these women are calling me to do. If you do not protect me from their machinations, I shall yield to them and do wrong,” ³⁴and his Lord answered his prayer and protected him from their machinations—He is the All Hearing, the All Knowing.
- ³ Among the general issues are those about the moral state of Egyptian nobility and the power of Egyptian nobility over the country’s lower classes. Examples of specific issues are: How many women were there (the Arabic plural used for women in verse 30, *niswa*—the form indicating fewness or paucity) raises this question)? Did the women only injure themselves or did they cut their hands off from their bodies (the Arabic phrase *qatṭa‘na aydiyahunna*—the verb *qatṭa‘na* being emphatic) raises this question). Why did the women call Joseph an angel?
- ⁴ Mawdūdī does not discuss the incident in his exegetical notes, but it is clear from his translation of verse 31 that he, too, accepts the traditional interpretation.
- ⁵ The Urdu forms as they occur in Iṣlāḥī’s commentary are *malāmat*, *shamātat*, and *iddi‘ā*.
- ⁶ The word also occurs in verse 61, with the brothers, upon being asked by Joseph to bring his real brother with him next time, saying, *sa-nurāwidu ‘anhu abāhu*. Abdel Haleem translates this, “We shall do all we can to persuade his father to send him with us.” But, in this verse, too, the word *nurāwidu* carries a definite hint of the brothers’ intention to use, if necessary, deceptive means to lure Joseph’s brother from their father. Cf. also the word *rāwadūhu* in 54:37, where, too, the suggestion is that the people of Lot tried to coax or beguile Lot into handing his guests over to them.
- ⁷ At this point, Iṣlāḥī narrates in his commentary (4:210) an interesting incident from his own life. Once he was sitting in a friend’s store in Bombay, when a beggar appeared and sat down on the ground in front of the store. The storeowner threw him a small coin—*dawannī ya chawannī* (one-eighth or one-fourth of a rupee)—but the beggar refused to take anything less than five rupees. The storeowner paid no attention to him and continued his conversation with Iṣlāḥī. The beggar threatened to burn himself to death if the storeowner would not give him at least five rupees, but the storeowner turned a deaf ear to the demand. Iṣlāḥī noticed that the beggar had set fire to the lower part of his trousers. Iṣlāḥī became very nervous, and, he admits, began to

perspire. He wanted to give the beggar the money he was demanding, but his friend, the storeowner, stopped him. When the fire had burned the beggar's trousers up to the knee, and he realized that the storeowner was totally unmoved, he put out the fire with his own hands and walked away. The storeowner said to Iṣlāḥī, "We encounter such tricksters every day." Iṣlāḥī's response was, "These people seem to be the brothers of the Egyptian noblewomen."

- 8 Rāzī remarks that the women's extraordinary respect for Joseph was also caused by the marks of prophetic and angelic nature they had detected in Joseph (*wa-shāhadna minhu mahābata n-nubuwwati wa-hay' ata l-malakiyyati*) (Rāzī 1938, 18:127).
- 9 Ṭabāṭabā'ī remarks that Joseph underwent a greater ordeal when desired "today" by many women as compared with "yesterday," when he was desired by only one woman, Zulaykhā. (Ṭabāṭabā'ī 2002, 12:150)
- 10 Zamakhsharī n.d., 12:227: *bi-makrihinna bi-ghitiyābihinna wa-sū' i qālatihinna* (also Rāzī 1938, 18:126; Ālūsī 1970, 12:227; Shawkānī 1996, 3:25).
- 11 I borrow the word *iḥtiyāl* from (Qurṭubī 1967, 9:177): *fa-lammā sami'at bi-makrihinna ay bi-ghibatihinna wa-iḥtiyalihinna fī dhammihā* (also Tha'labī 2004, 3:371; Zamakhsharī n.d., 2:253; Ibn al-Jawzī 2002, 4:165; Rāzī 1938, 18:126; Abū Ḥayyān 1992, 6:267; Ibn Kathīr 1983, 4:23; Ālūsī 1970, 12:227; Shawkānī 1996, 3:25).
- 12 Ālūsī 1970 (12:227): *wa-qīla kānat istaktamat' hunna sirrahā fa-afshaynahū wa-atl'ana 'alā amrihā*. 12:227 (also Ibn 'Aṭīyya 2007, 3:238; Ibn al-Jawzī 2002, 4:165; Zamakhsharī n.d., 2: 253; Rāzī 1938, 18:126; Abū Ḥayyān 1992, 6:267; Shawkānī 1996, 3:25).

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