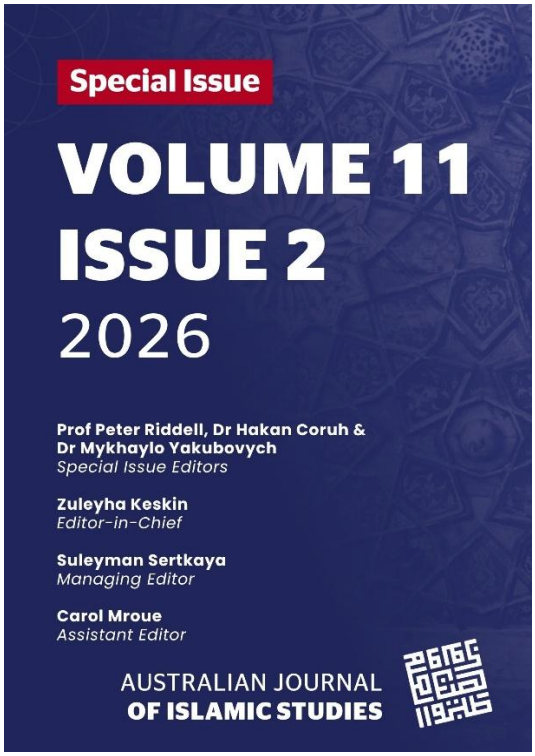

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"THE CLEAREST POINT OF THE STORY:" RABGHUZI'S *QIṢAṢ AL-ANBIYĀʾ* AND THE MESSAGE OF THE QURʾĀN FOR TURKO-MONGOL INNER ASIA

Robert Paix*

Abstract: This article examines the *Qiṣaṣ i-Rabghūzī*, the earliest and most influential Turkic rendition of the *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* tradition, composed by Nāṣir ad-Dīn Rabghūzī in 709–710 AH/1310–11 CE within the religiously plural and politically fractured world of the Chaghatay ulus (appanage). Focusing on Rabghūzī's richly developed Story of Joseph (Yūsuf), this article explores how he adapts and expands a well-established Qurʾānic storytelling tradition, adding local lore, lyric poetry, mystical insight, and pedagogical innovation. Rabghūzī crafts a multilayered work designed not merely to make Islamic scripture and culture accessible to a Türki-speaking audience but to shape behaviour and belief within a mixed Islamic environment. This article argues that Rabghūzī's concluding emphasis, "the clearest point of the story," which forbids harbouring a bad opinion of forgiven offenders, constitutes a call for reconciliation addressed not only to the general populace, but particularly to the divided Chinggisid elite. Yet this teaching is only the distilled expression of a wider programme: Rabghūzī offers Joseph as a paradigm of just kingship, patient Islamisation, moral reform, and communal integration, inviting Mongol elites to realise a truly Islamic polity through Joseph-like virtues.

Keywords: *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, *Rabghūzī*, *Joseph/Yūsuf*, *Central Asian Islam*

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INTRODUCTION

Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ ("Stories of the Prophets"), as a literary genre and discursive practice, may be described as that part of Islamic preaching and teaching that elaborates the backstories of prophets mentioned in the Qurʾān. Ideally, such retellings serve not simply to inform or entertain but to reinforce moral and religious lessons while sustaining the audience's engagement. More broadly, *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* functions as a powerful vehicle for the construction and dissemination of Islamic myth. Works belonging to this genre present chronological accounts of the prophets' lives as referenced in the Qurʾān, situating them within a salvation history that begins with creation and inexorably points to Muḥammad as the ultimate locus of God's revelation.[1]

Texts identified as *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* can be distinguished by the ways they draw on and combine the common source material—above all the Qurʾān, but also Prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*), biographical traditions about the Prophet (*sīrah*), Qurʾānic commentary (*tafsīr*), historiography, popular stories, and material of non-Islamic origin (*isrāʾīliyyāt*)[2]—and incorporate distinctive elements such as poetry or local motifs.[3] Another point of variation is the extent to which authors interrupt the narrative flow with reflective or didactic content. Consequently, *qiṣaṣ* texts exist along a spectrum from relatively unadorned narrative to more overtly homiletical storytelling. In terms of genre ecology, *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* occupies an intermediate position linking literary genres such as *tafsīr* and historiography with the oral, performative genres of preaching and storytelling.

As a literary genre, *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* reached a definitive form in the *ʿArāʾis al-majālis fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* of the 11th century exegete Thaʿlabī,[4] and in the collection attributed to Kisāʾī,[5] both composed in Arabic.[6] Since then, works in this tradition have proliferated across the Muslim world in many languages. Although the genre does not enjoy the prestige of more scholarly Islamic literature, texts in the tradition of Thaʿlabī and Kisāʾī have found wide popular reception, especially among non-Arabic-speaking communities.[7]

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1 Gottfried Hagen, "From Haggadic Exegesis to Myth: Popular Stories of the Prophets in Islam," in *Sacred Tropes: Tanakh, New Testament and Qurʾān as Literature and Culture*, ed. Roberta Sterman Sabbath (Brill, 2009), 305–307; Gottfried Hagen, "Salvation and Suffering in Ottoman Stories of the Prophets," *Mizan* 2, no. 1 (2017), https://mizanproject.org/journal-post/salvation-and-suffering-in-ottoman-stories-of-the-prophets; Tilman Nagel, "Achieving an Islamic Interpretation of Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ," *Mizan* 2, no. 1 (2017), http://mizanproject.org/journal-post/achieving-an-islamic-interpretation-of-qisas-al-anbiya/.

2 Robert Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'ān and Muslim Literature,* trans. Michael Robertson (Routledge, 2002), 86–92. See also İsmail Albayrak, "Isrāʾīliyyāt and Classical Exegetes' Comments on the Calf with a Hollow Sound Q.20:83-98/7:147-155 with Special Reference to Ibn ʿAṭiyya," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 47, no. 1 (2002).

3 Al-Rabghūzī, *The Stories of the Prophets Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ: An Eastern Turkish Version*, ed. H. E. Boeschoten and J. O'Kane, 2nd ed. (Brill, 2015), 1:xiii–xv.

4 Al-Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis al-majālis fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ or 'Lives of the Prophets' as Recounted by Abū Ishāq Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Thaʿlabī*, trans. W. M. Brinner (Brill, 2002).

5 Al-Kisaʿī, *The Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisaʿī. Translated from the Arabic with Notes*, trans. W. M. Thackston (Twayne, 1978). The author is sometimes identified incorrectly with the well-known Kisāʾī from the 8th century. See Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets*, 152.

6 Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets*, 154.

7 Hagen, "Haggadic Exegesis to Myth," 304–305.

Michael Pregill, Marianna Klar and Roberto Tottoli have recently stressed the need to treat *qiṣaṣ* material as a distinct and important form of discourse that can be found in many kinds of Islamic literature. They emphasise that questions concerning the relationships of major *qiṣaṣ* works to their milieus, other textual traditions, and each other remain largely unexplored.[8]

This study turns attention to a comparatively less examined but important work: the distinct and original *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* of *qāḍī* (Islamic judge) Nāṣir ad-Dīn Rabghūzī, written in 709–10 AH/1310–11 CE in Transoxiana (Mā warāʾ al-nahr) during a critical moment for the status and progress of Islam under Mongol rule.[9] Dubbed *Qiṣaṣ i-Rabghūzī* by the author, this is the earliest and most influential example of the genre in a Turkic language. Over the centuries, it has made its mark on religious, social, and literary culture across the Turkic world and remains significant for communities from East Turkestan to the Balkans.[10] The persistence of Rabghūzī's work is evident in the various "modernised" versions that can be found in the manuscripts[11] and contemporary editions in various modern Turkic transcriptions and languages.[12]

In what follows, I examine Rabghūzī's Story of Joseph (Yūsuf) to show how he adapts and contextualises an established Qurʾānic storytelling tradition not only to address the tastes, values, and concerns of his Turko-Mongol audience,[13] but to advance a vision of Islam that was designed to effectively shape the social, political, and religious landscape.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Rabghūzī dedicated his work to Toqbuqa Bek, a Mongol amir whom he describes as a "glorious leader," "patron of the religious scholars," devoted Muslim and diligent student of the Qurʾān.[14] Devin DeWeese has recently endorsed Charles Rieu's identification of

8 Michael Pregill, Marianna Klar and Roberto Tottoli, "*Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ* as Genre and Discourse," *Mizan* 2, no. 1 (2017): 11, http://mizanproject.org/journal-post/qisas-al-anbiya-as-genre-and-discourse.

9 Hagen, "Haggadic Exegesis to Myth," 305.

10 See, for example, Aftandil Erkinov and Dilnavaz Yusupova, "'Olan'-A Song for Weddings or Treatment?" *Oriente Moderno* 87, no. 1 (2007); Naile Hacıyeva, "Nasireddin Rabguzi'nin Kısasü'l-Enbiya'sında Türk-İslam Kültürü Açısından Dini Ve Dünyevi Bakışlar" [Nāṣir ad-Dīn Rabghūzī's *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* from the Perspective of Religious and Worldly Views in Turkish-Islamic Culture], in *Uluslararası Dördüncü Türk Kültürü Kongresi Bildirileri*, ed. Azize Aktaş Yasa (Atatürk Kültür Merkezi, 2000), 241–48; Gunnar Jarring, *Literary Texts from Kashghar Edited and Translated with Notes and Glossary* (CWK Gleerup, 1980); Magdalena Lubanska, *Muslims and Christians in the Bulgarian Rhodopes: Studies on Religious (Anti)Syncretism* (De Gruyter Open, 2015), 302; Rian Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*, Kindle ed. (Harvard University Press, 2014), location 691/7663.

11 Jarring, *Literary Texts*, 16.

12 Rabghuziy, *Qisasi Rabghuziy*, ed. A. Yunusov, H. Dadaboyev, E. Fozilov, 2 vols. (Yozuvchi, 1990–1991); Rabgûzî, *Kısasü'l-Enbiyà (Peygamber Kıssaları) I-Giriş-Metin-Tıpkıbasım* [*Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* (Stories of the Prophets) Volume I: Introduction - Text - Facsimile], ed. Aysu Ata (Türk Dil Kurumu Yayınları, 1997); Nasiriddin Rabghuzi, *Qisesul Enbiya* [Stories of the Prophets], ed. Haji Xoja Abdulla Osman (Kashgar Uyghur Press, 1999); Nasyreddin Rabguzy, *Kysasy Rabguzy (Kysasyl Enbiýa)* [Stories of Rabghūzī (Stories of the Prophets)], ed. W. M. Hramow and A. A. Aşyrow (Miras, 2004). Rabghūzī's name is spelled in different ways in the modern Turkic editions.

13 For an example of this approach, see Michal Biran, "Āṣaf Ibn Barakhyā in the Mongol and Mamluk Realms: Between Vizier and Magic," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 27 (2024).

14 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:6–7.

Rabghūzī's patron with the *nā'ib* (deputy) of the same name whom Ibn Baṭṭūṭah encountered in Nakhshab/Qarshi (between Bukhara and Samarqand) at the court of the Muslim ruler Tarmashirin (r. 731–35 AH/1331–34 CE) some 20 years after Rabghūzī completed his book.[15] If correct, this places Rabghūzī within the historical *ulus* (appanage) of Chaghatay, second son of Chinggis Khan. It also hints at a measure of initial success on the part of Rabghūzī and his beloved amir Toqbuqa, insofar as their project was the Islamisation of Mongol Inner Asia.

Chaghatay's portion of the Mongol Empire ranged from the agrarian and urbanised areas of Transoxiana and Kashgaria to Uighuria and the pasturelands and river valleys of Yettisu. Chaghatay (r. 1227–42) and his immediate successors were staunch traditionalists who retained Mongol lifeways, residing in mobile tent cities in the Ili and Chu river basins of Yettisu.[16] Over time, however, the line of traditionalist rulers supported by a military-nomadic aristocracy was disrupted by khans who gravitated toward the urban centres of Transoxiana and, in some cases, embraced Islam. Around the time Rabghūzī composed his book, the Muslim Khan Talighu (r. 708–9 AH/1308–9 CE) was killed by supporters of the non-Muslim Kebek (r. 1309–10 CE and 1319/20–26 CE).[17] The next Muslim ruler, Tarmashirin, or ʿAla al-Dīn Muḥammad, was probably a convert from Buddhism, influenced by a Kubrawī Sufi master.[18] His vigorous promotion of Islam was regarded by some Mongol elites as contravening principles of religious tolerance and consultation associated with the Chinggisid legal tradition (*yāsaq*). Yet, despite Tarmashirin's assassination by conservative factions, Islamisation in the western Chaghatay realm was by then well advanced, and by the end of the 14th century, the eastern portion (Moghulistan) had also become officially Islamic.[19]

This transformation was not simply imposed from above. Rather, "(I)t looks more as if Tarmashirin's pro-Muslim policies were an accelerating factor, which transformed a mixed society into a more Muslim one."[20] DeWeese notes that it was the "amīrid class…who often preceded the Chingissids in adopting Islam, and in some cases clearly urged them in that direction."[21] Meanwhile, Turkic groups at the margins and newly settled Mongols were being drawn into Islam, often through Sufi teachings.[22] Starr observes that the forms of learning

15 Devin DeWeese, "Turkic and Chaghatay Sources," in *The Cambridge History of the Mongol Empire Volume II Part 1 - Literary Sources*, ed. Michal Biran and Hodong Kim (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 281; Charles Rieu, *Catalogue of the Turkish Manuscripts in the British Museum* (Trustees of the British Museum, 1888), 270.

16 Michal Biran, "Culture and Cross-Cultural Contacts in the Chaghadaid Realm: 1220-1370: Some Preliminary Notes," *Chronica (Szeged)* 7-8 (2007), 31; Peter Jackson, *From Genghis Khan to Tamerlane: The Reawakening of Mongol Asia* (Yale University Press, 2023), 62, 199.

17 Christoph Baumer, *The History of Central Asia: The Age of Islam and the Mongols* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 245.

18 This was Yaḥyā Abū l-Mafākhir Bākharzī (d. 736 AH/1335–6 CE), grandson of Sayf al-Dīn Bākharzī (d. 659 AH/1261 CE) who, according to tradition, converted Berke Khan of the Golden Horde (1257–67). See Michal Biran, "The Chaghadaids and Islam: The Conversion of Tarmashirin Khan (1331-34)," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 122, no. 4 (2002): 745–46, https://doi.org/10.2307/3217613.

19 Baumer, *Central Asia*, 246; Biran, "Chaghadaids and Islam," 748, 750; Peter Jackson, "Reflections on the Islamization of Mongol Khans in Comparative Perspective," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 62, no. 2/3 (2019): 369–71, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26673134.

20 Biran, "Chaghadaids and Islam," 751.

21 DeWeese, "Turkic and Chaghatay Sources," 281.

22 Jackson, "Islamization of Mongol Khans," 365; Biran "Cross-Cultural Contacts," 42.

attractive to these new Muslims were "inwardly focused and personal…speaking as much to the emotions as to the mind," resonating with earlier Tengrist sensibilities.[23]

Rabghūzī's world was also marked by significant religious pluralism. Church of the East (Nestorian) communities persisted in the Ili and Chu valleys, Turfan, and Samarqand. Roman Catholic missionaries from Europe and Alexandria established bishoprics in Almaligh in the mid-1320s and in Samarqand in 1329. Buddhism remained influential in former Uyghur lands, and Tibetan Buddhism made inroads among Uyghur and Mongol populations.[24]

A similar pattern unfolded in the adjacent Jochid (Golden Horde) *ulus*.[25] Rabghūzī's audience, therefore, cannot be confined to Chaghatay domains alone. He was surely conscious of the broader cultural, political, and religious landscape of Mongol Eurasia, and he openly hoped for a readership stretching "from where the sun rises to where the sun sets."[26] Rabghūzī's work is sometimes assumed to be an example of Golden Horde literature.[27]

I contend that one of Rabghūzī's fundamental aims was to bridge the divide between urbanised, Persianate Islamic civilisation and the nomadic or semi-nomadic lifeways of Turko-Mongol peoples. His compilation models a form of Islam that is emotionally resonant and culturally adaptable—an Islam for both the Chinggisid elite and the ordinary pastoralists increasingly drawn into the Muslim fold. This is not to suggest that Rabghūzī wrote a "missionary" work in the absence of an existing Turkic-speaking Muslim audience (a position DeWeese rightly critiques).[28] Rather, he wrote with acute awareness of a mixed religious society and an eye to facilitating the emergence of a new, integrative Islamic polity in which diverse communities could see themselves fully reflected.[29]

With this context in mind, I analyse how Rabghūzī reshapes the *qiṣaṣ* tradition for his Turko-Mongol world, showing how the lessons woven throughout his Joseph narrative together enable the force and application of what he ultimately presents as "the clearest point" of the story. For textual control, I rely on the 2015 Brill critical edition of Boeschoten and O'Kane.[30]

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23 S. Frederick Starr, *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 473.

24 Biran, "Cross-Cultural Contacts," 36–38.

25 Devin DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde: Baba Tükles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 87–88; Roman Hautala, "Comparing the Islamisation of the Jochid and Hülegüid Uluses: Muslim and Christian Perspectives," *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 243 (2018), https://doi.org/10.4000/remmm.10705.

26 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:8, 638.

27 See, for example, A. Aşyrow, "Şekerden Datly Kyssa" [A Story Sweet as Sugar], in *Kysasy Rabguzy (Kysasyl Enbiýa)*, ed. W. M. Hramow and A. A. Aşyrow (Miras, 2004), 488, 496; Uli Schamiloglu, "Reflections on the Islamic Literature of the Golden Horde: On the Occasion of the Publication of the Qalandar-Name," *Golden Horde Review* 9, no. 2 (2021).

28 DeWeese, "Turkic and Chaghatay Sources," 273–74, 282.

29 See Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Harvard University Press, 1979), especially chapter 4. I am indebted to the Reverend Professor Daniel Madigan SJ for pointing me to Bulliet's work.

30 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*. This critical text is based on all the best and oldest manuscripts, except for possibly three Tashkent manuscripts that await full evaluation. See A. O'rinboyev and L. M. Elifanova, *Sobranie Vostochnykh Rukopisej Akademii Nauk Uzbekskoj SSR* [Collection of Oriental Manuscripts of the

GENERAL FEATURES

In this section I introduce the general features of Rabghūzī's "Story of Joseph," including language, structure and teaching method.

The main language of the text, which Rabghūzī's calls simply "Türki," according to latter-day taxonomies is an example of "Khwarezmian Turkic," the name given to the literary language in use in Inner Asia during the 13th and 14th centuries.[31] By writing in the Türki language Rabghūzī gave his Turkic speaking audience a window into the Arabo-Islamic world, including access to at least some of the text of the Qurʾān, narrative traditions and sayings. While Arabic words were being brought into the Türki lexicon, Rabghūzī's lexicon still included long-standing Türki religious terms such as **uǰmaḫ**[32] ("Paradise,") **tamuġ** ("Hell") (both originally from Sogdian) and **Tạñrï** ("God"), the name of the sky-god in traditional Turko-Mongolian religion.[33]

Rabghūzī's Story of Joseph is second in length only to his cycle of stories about Muhammad.[34] The bulk of the text comes under the heading "The Story of Joseph *the Truthful, peace be upon him*."[35] There is a relatively short concluding section under the sub-heading "How Zulaikhā was United with the Prophet Joseph, *peace be upon him*,"[36] in which Rabghūzī reprises the extra-Qurʾānic love story of Joseph and Zulaikhā before narrating Joseph's death and making his conclusion about "the clearest point."[37]

The main storyline concerns a young boy who has (literal) dreams of greatness and, by the plan of God, endures many hardships before seeing those dreams come true. Although not without flaws, he emerges as an ideal ruler of a great nation. More, he is a prophet of the one

Academy of Sciences of the Uzbek SSR], vol. 7 (Nauka, 1964), 332–36. However, recent indications suggest that Biruni Institute now considers only one of these to be truly old (that is, from no later than the 16th century). Zilola Shukurova (Associate Professor, Tashkent State University of Uzbek Language and Literature), personal communication, 28 September 2023.

31 Mustafa Argunşah and Gülden Sağol Yüksekkaya, *Karahanlıca, Harezmce, Kıpçakça Dersleri* [Lessons in Karakhanid, Khwarezmian, and Kipchak] (Kesit Yayınları, 2019); János Eckmann, "Das Chwarezmtürkische" [Khwarezmian Turkic] in *Philologiae Turcicae Fundamenta I*, ed. Jean Deny et al. (Franz Steiner Verlag, 1959).

32 To distinguish between Türki and Arabic words from Rabghūzī's text, the original and translations of the former appear in bold type while those of the latter are in italics.

33 Gerard Clauson, *An Etymological Dictionary of Pre-13th Century Turkish* (Oxford University Press, 1972), 257, 503, 523. For a brief analysis of some aspects of Rabghūzī's skilful use of language, see Naile Hacıyeva, "Nasireddin Rabguzi'nin Kısasü'l-Enbiya Isimli Eserinin Semantik Ve Poetik (Anlam Ve Şiirsel Cümle Yapı Özellikleri)" [The Semantic and Poetic Features (Meaning and Poetic Sentence Structure) of Nāṣir ad-Dīn Rabghūzī's *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ*], *Selçuk Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi*, no. 11 (1997).

34 The inclusion of the stories of Muḥammad and the first four caliphs is a distinct feature of non-Arabic works from the genre *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*.

35 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:136. Italics here and in all quotations from the text and translation of Boeschoten and O'Kane are original. They are used to indicate the source text is in Arabic as opposed to Türki.

36 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:225.

37 Ibid., 2:231

true God who provides for him, pulls him back from the brink and gifts him with wonderful abilities. It is to the true Faith in this Creator God that he calls others, regardless of rank.[38]

The most important sub-plot, then, is the love story of Joseph and Zulaikhā in which her understandable but illicit love for Joseph becomes a holy love when the roles are reversed: Joseph is the superior and Zulaikhā a humbled, restored and converted woman whose love for her husband is exceeded only by her love for God.

One of the unique features of Rabghūzī's *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* is the way he begins each prophet story. A highly stylised introduction encapsulating the major events and attributes of the person's life is followed by a poetic eulogy of the prophet in *ramal* metre.[39] The prophet is introduced with the words "He is the one who..." followed by a series of epithets identifying the subject as the one who is found in the Qurʾān. Citations from select verses (in Joseph's case, from Surah 12)[40] are linked by clauses in Türki, making a completely bilingual, code-switching opening statement. Such an opening is also indicative of the linguistic and narrative character of the ensuing text. Verses from the Qurʾān, mostly from Surah 12 and usually in chronological order, are woven into the Türki text, often but not always with an accompanying Türki translation.[41] Additionally, the Qurʾānic account of Joseph notionally provides the overarching narrative framework and some limitations for the "fuller" story that Rabghūzī tells.

The eulogy that follows the opening statement, then, is a Türki poem, in Joseph's case consisting of six *baits* (couplets).[42] Rabghūzī must have anticipated that such a poetic summary of the prophet's life would be readily memorised and recited. History tells us of women on the Volga frontier singing Rabghūzī's eulogies as *munājāt* (devotional supplicatory hymns) and Kazakh *akhunds* (Muslim religious scholars or clerics) singing pieces from Rabghūzī while playing the *dombra*, a traditional two-stringed lute.[43]

Rabghūzī frequently inserts set words and phrases into the textual flow to signal something about the source or nature of the utterance or discourse that follows. Regarding sources and authorities, Rabghūzī is much more sparing with names than Thaʿlabī. Further, where Thaʿlabī provides an *isnād* (chain of reporters), Rabghūzī trims this down to the first reporter in the chain.[44] Arguably, Rabghūzī elects not to overburden his text or test the audience with an abundance of names. He is more inclined to use generic attributions that nevertheless convey a sense of authority. The most common of these tags is the word **ạymïšlar** ("it has been

38 I am assuming the reader is familiar with the Qurʾānic and/or biblical story of Joseph. For an outline of the story in Rabghūzī, see the Appendix.

39 *Ramal* is a classical Arabic quantitative metre known for its trotting rhythm and melodic quality, frequently chosen for laudatory or religious poetry.

40 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:136

41 Various non-Qurʾānic Arabic texts also appear throughout the story, only sometimes translated into Türki.

42 In some manuscripts, seven *baits*. Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 1:118 n. 21.

43 Agnès Kefeli, *Becoming Muslim in Imperial Russia: Conversion, Apostasy, and Literacy* (Cornell University Press, 2014), 68; A. R. Iskhakova, "Ispol'zovanie Numerativov v Tyurkoyazychnom Pamyatnike XIV Veka 'Kysas Al-Anbiya' Rabguzi" [The Use of Numeratives in Rabghūzī's 14th Century Turkic Work *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ*], *Bulletin of Chuvash University* 1 (2010).

44 Compare, for instance, the tradition from Ḥasan Baṣrī (d. 110/728) in Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:149 and Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 191.

related")[45] and variations on the same root verb. Whether or not he includes a name, Rabghūzī often uses the nouns **ẖạbạr** ("report") and **ḥạdiṯ (**"ḥadīth") in verb phrases to label *ḥadīths* and *ḥadīth*-type material. For other kinds of material, Rabghūzī uses **rịvayạt** ("account"), **ḥịkayạt** ("anecdote") and **qiṣṣa** ("story"). The verbs **ẖịṭab qïl-/yạrlïqa-** ("to declare"), one a productive loan word and the other a native Turkic/Mongolian word, are reserved for Prophet-associated sayings. When reporting from Companions or Successors, Rabghūzī commonly uses the word **ạytur**, a present-future or gnomic form of the verb **ạy-** ("to say"), thus giving the utterance a sense of timeless authority.

One of the ways Rabghūzī elaborates on an utterance or event just recounted is by means of a "question and answer" formula. This feature cannot be found in Thaʿlabī or Kisāʾī, but it is present, albeit less frequently, in the Persian-language *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ* of 6th/12th century figure Abū Isḥāq al-Nīshābūrī,[46] a source that Rabghūzī explicitly names in his story of Noah. To provide an example from Rabghūzī:

> Question: Joseph underwent many ordeals. God didn't inspire Zulaikhā and Potiphar to impose any other ordeal [than prison]. What was His wisdom in this? The answer is that the Lord, *He is mighty and glorious*, had caused a man who was a Friend of God to be in prison. In that devotee's heart there was love for Joseph. The Friend prayed: "Oh my Lord, show me Joseph's beauty.[47]

In Rabghūzī, the answers to such questions may include further narrative material, and multiple, cumulative or alternative answers may be given. These teaching moments are typically concerned with clarifying a point of belief or practice, or revealing and explaining the purposeful operations of the Almighty that lie behind the scenes.

More uniquely, Rabghūzī punctuates his story with other kinds of comments and excurses, which he tags with words like **faʾịdä** ("an instructive point"),[48] **ịšarạt** ("an instructive indication"),[49] **lạṭifạ** ("a subtle point"),[50] **lạṭifạ-ỉ ʿụlvi** ("a heavenly subtlety"),[51] and **bịšarạt** ("the glad tidings").[52] Poems of various metres, in Arabic and Türki, also appear throughout the story, sometimes introduced with words such as **šịʿr** ("poem"),[53] **bạyt** ("verse"),[54] and **ġạzạl** ("ghazal").[55]

Viewed together, these general features show Rabghūzī crafting a narrative environment in which Qurʾānic authority, Türki expression, poetic affect, and didactic clarification work in concert. His Story of Joseph is not simply a retelling but a multilayered teaching text in which

45 A more literal translation would be "They have reportedly said…"
46 Isḥāq b. Ibrāhīm b. Manṣūr b. Khalafī Al-Naysābūrī, *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ* [Stories of the Prophets] (Scientific and Cultural Publishing Company, 2003).
47 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:184.
48 Ibid., 1:136/2:157.
49 Ibid., 1:151/2:172.
50 Ibid., 1:141/2:162.
51 Ibid., 1:119/2:139.
52 Ibid., 1:168/2:194.
53 Ibid., 1:138/2:160.
54 Ibid., 1:120/2:139.
55 Ibid., 1:146/2:168.

he uses the tools of linguistic mediation, narrative expansion, selective sourcing, and purposeful commentary.

THE QURʾĀN AND OTHER SOURCES

Rabghūzī makes explicit the place of the Qurʾān as the putative foundational source and final authority, calling it "the Eternal Book, the lofty, splendid and noble Qurʾān."[56] This does not preclude him from exercising a considerable amount of latitude in his use of the Qurʾānic text, as we shall see.

Taking his cue from Q.12:3, Rabghūzī provides nine reasons why the story of Joseph is called "the best of stories," the first of which is that "of all the stories in the Qurʾān (it is) the richest in entertaining episodes and most plentiful in instructive points."[57]

Eighty-four of the 111 verses of Surah 12 are quoted or paraphrased, at least in part and at least once, and mostly in order. Twenty-four quotations or paraphrases from 16 other Surahs can also be found throughout the Joseph account.

The Qurʾān as Narrative Skeleton[58]

Rabghūzī passes over the first two verses of Surah 12 and verses 103–10 and most of verse 111 at the end of the Surah as these verses do not directly reference the story. Further, he does not feel obliged to quote every other verse of the Surah, even where he is clearly covering the same content.[59]

Sometimes the Qurʾānic text carries the burden of the narrative, with the Arabic sentences interspersed by free translation or paraphrase in Türki. For example, with words from Q.12:100:

> And (Joseph) said: "He has brought you here from the wilderness of Canaan." *In His words, He be exalted:* "*…and brought you out of the desert…*" "And between me and my brothers Satan has created discord." "*…after Satan had stirred up strife between me and my brothers*." "My Lord has the grace to send favours to whomever He wishes." "*My Lord is gracious to whomever He wishes*." "He is knowing and wise." "*He alone is wise and all-knowing*."[60]

It is possible that Rabghūzī used this format to give a particular intensity to some of his most important points. In this and other paragraphs of the same structure we find the themes of forgiveness, reconciliation between brothers and the call to embrace Islam.[61]

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56 Ibid., 2:137.
57 Ibid., 2:137.
58 I have taken this use of the term "skeleton" from Hagen, "From Haggadic Exegesis to Myth," 315.
59 The verses from Q.12 that form part of the story but are not directly quoted by Rabghūzī are 6–7, 14, 34–35, 49–50, 56–57, 59, 61–62, 64–65, 74, 81, 89, 99.
60 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:223.
61 See also Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:186–187, 2:220.

For the most part, however, the Qurʾānic citations are spread more thinly throughout the Türki language narrative and can sometimes be completely absent for long stretches. As is typical in this kind of literature, Rabghūzī engages in a high level of "narrative expansion" of the Qurʾānic text so even whole new episodes are created.[62] This phenomenon, too, brings to light some of his chief concerns. For instance, between citations of verses 20 and 21 of Surah Yūsuf, there are about three folios of intervening text in the manuscript used as the baseline for the critical text edition.[63] The text here covers events that take place on Joseph's journey to Egypt, and it depicts the pathos of Joseph in the slave market and the sensation he created among the Egyptians. Included in this section are references to other Surahs, a short poem and anti-Christian polemic. Rabghūzī substantially develops the character and standing of Joseph as a prophet, and, perhaps most significantly, introduces Qiṭfīr (the biblical Potiphar) and his wife Zulaikhā. Critically, Rabghūzī interrupts the story to ask the question as to God's wisdom in having Joseph brought to Egypt in particular. The answer is that in Egypt there was a woman called Zulaikhā whom God had ordained would receive the faith from Joseph. In this way, Rabghūzī gives a prominence to the story of Joseph and Zulaikhā not found in Thaʿlabī, Kisāʾī or even the more mystical Nīshābūrī, and casts a theme that will keep his audience hooked until the end of the story.

To further illustrate how Rabghūzī deploys the Qurʾān within his narrative: events recounted in summary form in the Qurʾān can become extended narrative or descriptive texts,[64] summary speeches are expanded into complete dialogues, the "silences" of the Qurʾān can be filled in and, on occasion, the Qurʾān's account can be held back.[65]

The Qurʾān and Thematic Emphases

Rabghūzī also uses the Qurʾān to expand on themes and teaching points that arise in the course of the narration. In this case, he draws on verses that do not necessarily relate directly to the story at hand.

For instance, when Jacob warns his sons not to enter the city in Egypt by a single gate, Rabghūzī follows the tradition that attributes the danger to the evil eye,[66] and embarks on a lengthy excursus in which he draws on Q.68:51–52, 5:57 and 14:36.[67] Sometimes these thematic "insertions" become part of the narrative, as for instance when Q.6:103 and 30:4 are integrated with Zulaikhā's declaration of faith.[68]

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62 On the concept of narrative expansion, see Gayane Karen Merguerian and Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Zulaykha and Yusuf: Whose Best Story?" *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29 (1997).

63 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 1:132–37/2:153–59.

64 For example, the second half of Q.12:15 is not quoted but its report of God encouraging Joseph becomes a richly detailed account of the physical and spiritual sustenance provided by Gabriel to Joseph while he was in the well. Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:148–150.

65 For example, where Rabghūzī omits Q.12:6 altogether, Thaʿlabī quotes it as Jacob's interpretation of Joseph's dream. See Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 186.

66 See, for instance, Naysābūrī, *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ*, 125.

67 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:199-200

68 Ibid., 2:227

Qirāʾāt

Rabghūzī presents *qirāʾāt* (alternative readings of the Qurʾān) only 12 times in his entire book. Six of these are found in the Joseph story, sometimes with multiple alternatives and only twice with attribution. Some of these *qirāʾāt* are non-canonical. Rabghūzī appears to be unique in attributing a well-known one of these to ʿAbdallāh b. Masʿūd.[69] Two other non-canonical readings are of particular interest. In the first one, Rabghūzī mentions a reading of Q.12:70 that indicates Zulaikhā placed before the women who came to her banquet "citrons"[70] or "oranges."[71] However, in the Türki translation, Rabghūzī, drawing on a tradition that apparently goes back to Wahb b. Munabbih (d. 112 AH/728 CE),[72] opts for **qaġun**, the famed muskmelon of central Asia.[73]

The other non-canonical alternative worth mentioning is the reading of the last line of Q.12:31, the exclamation of the women at Zulaikhā's banquet when they see Joseph. In the Brill English translation edition this appears as a *qirāʾāt* "with a *kasra* under the *shīn* and the *lām*," so "*This is not a bearer of glad tidings, but nothing less than a noble king.*"[74] However, there may be a problem with the text here. The reading better fits Rabghūzī's Türki translation and becomes at least partially attested elsewhere if we follow an option mentioned by Baidawi, with *kasra* under the *bāʾ* as well as the *shīn* of the third word, so *bašaran* ("mortal") becomes, not *baširan* ("bearer of glad tidings"), but *bi-širan* ("contemptible bought slave").[75] Hence, the Türki, as translated in the Brill edition: "With this beauty and bearing he cannot be a slave for sale. This is a noble king."[76] The motive for using this reading is, of course, to bring the women's response closer to the specific details of the story.

Other Authorities and Sources

Where Thaʿlabī names no less than 50 authorities and sources apart from the Qurʾān in his story of Joseph, Rabghūzī names only 16. The Prophet is the most cited (nine times), followed by Ibn ʿAbbās (four times.) Only three of his citations of the Prophet are labelled "*ḥadīth*," but he does not seem to be using the word in a technically consistent way. Rabghūzī integrates various narrative traditions attributed to the Prophet—some canonical, others of a more popular or homiletic character—without making strict distinctions between juridical *ḥadīth* and other Prophet-associated sayings circulating in literature or oral storytelling.

Most of the remaining authorities named by Rabghūzī are well-known Companions of the Prophet or Successors who are commonly cited in *qiṣaṣ* literature. Notably, Rabghūzī also cites

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69 Ibid., 1:176/2:203. Compare with A. F. L. Beeston, *Baiḍāwī's Commentary on Sūrah 12 of the Qurʾān* (Clarendon Press, 1963), 37.
70 Kisāʾī, *Tales of the Prophets*, 176.
71 Naysābūrī, *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ*, 102.
72 See Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 202.
73 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 1:156/2:179
74 Ibid., 1:159/2:182.
75 Beeston, *Baiḍāwī's Commentary*, 19.
76 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:182. I find no other attestation for reading *malakun* as *malikun.*

Abū l-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī (d. 324 AH/936 CE) of the eponymous Ashʿarī school of theology.[77] Less well-known figures cited are from Khorasan and Transoxiana. Rabghūzī tells a story about Sulaymān b. Yasār and Joseph's inclination toward Zulaikhā that comes from *Ījāz al-Bayān ʿan Maʿānī al-Qurʾān* written by Maḥmūd b. Abū l-Ḥasan an-Nīsābūrī (d. after 553 AH/1158 CE) in Khujand in present-day Tajikistan.[78] Another name is Ḥāmid Nasawī, possibly Ḥumayd ibn Makhlad al-Nisāwī (d. ca. 251 AH/865 CE), from Nisa in present-day Turkmenistan.[79] Finally, there are the mysterious (to us) "[A]mmārite stories"[80]—perhaps a reference to a Central Asian school as yet unknown to us. Judging from all nine narrations and statements attributed to them in Rabghūzī's book, the Ạmmari were interested in issues of cosmology, eschatology and genealogy.

There is at least one important source that Rabghūzī does not identify. Many years ago, Gerard Clausen gave persuasive evidence that Rabghūzī borrowed directly from Yūsuf Khāṣṣ Ḥājib's (ca. 470 AH/1077 CE) *Qutadğu Bilig* for his "heavenly subtlety" on the signs of the zodiac and the seven stars.[81] This establishes a link with a literary product of the first Turkic Muslim Empire, that of the Qarakhanids (*al-Khāqāniyya*) (ca. 349–609 AH/960–1212 CE), written in an earlier stage of Eastern Turkic Islamic literary language.

POETRY

One of the outstanding features of Rabghūzī's Q*iṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ* is his extensive use of verse, particularly in his Story of Joseph and his Muḥammad cycle. Many of the poems appear to be his own creation.[82] The 15 poems in the Joseph story are of varying length, mostly in Türki with some Arabic, and mostly *qaṣīdas* (panegyric odes) or *ghazals* (short lyric poems) in the *ramal* metre or quatrains in the *mutaqārib* metre, often associated with epic verse.[83] These poems do not add content to the narrative or exposition as much as they relate in some way to the surrounding narrative context, serving to heighten the reader's emotional engagement with the characters or memorably reinforce the point being made.

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77 Ibid., 2:147.

78 Ibid., 2:172. Compare with Abū al-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. Abī al-Ḥasan al-Naysābūrī, *ʾĪjāz al-Bayān ʿan Maʿānī al-Qurʾān* [A Concise Exposition of the Meanings of the Qurʾān], ed. Ḥanīf b. Ḥasan al-Qāsimī (Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1995), 1:434, https://ar.lib.eshia.ir/41701/1/434.

79 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:214.

80 Ibid., 2:164.

81 Gerard Clauson, "Early Turkish Astronomical Terms," *Ural-Altaische Jahrbücher* 35 (1964), 139. I learned of Clauson's article from Robert Dankoff, "Review of *Al-Rabghūzī, The Stories of the Prophets, Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ, An Eastern Turkish Version*, by H. E. Boeschoten and M. Vandamme," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 117, no. 1 (1997): 117–18.

82 In this work, as many as 61 poems make up 400 lines or about 2.5% of the text. H. E. Boeschoten and M. van Damme, "The Poetry in Rabghuzi's Qisas" in *L'Asie Centrale et ses Voisins: Influences Réciproques*, ed. Rémy Dor (INALCO, 1990), 10, 15.

83 Boeschoten and van Damme, "Poetry," 15. For a technical discussion of Rabghūzī's poetry, see Hendrik Boeschoten, "Vokalquantität in Rabghuzis Poesie" [Vowel Quantity in Rabghūzī's Poetry], *Central Asiatic Journal* 34, no. 3/4 (1990).

We have already mentioned that the eulogy of the prophet found at the beginning of the story was later popularly recited among Turkic peoples and sung as a *munajat.* Here, I can only touch on a few salient aspects of some of the other poems in the Joseph story.

After a narration about Zulaikhā's old nurse building the house in which Zulaikhā might entrap Joseph, Rabghūzī places a satirical *ghazal* about old women that ends by claiming they bring disaster to "Sart as well as Mongol."[84] The level of hostility expressed in this poem is astonishing, but it is in this context of raw feeling that Rabghūzī expresses solidarity between the sedentary population (Sart) and the traditionally nomadic people.

The "*Spring Time Ode by the honourable judge Nāṣir ar-Rabghūzī*"[85] is a celebration of the beauty of the "open plains," at once affirming the lived experience of steppe-dwellers and pastoralists and heightening the evocative power of Joseph's brothers' invitation to go out with them. In Rabghūzī's telling, Joseph's pleading finally forces his father Jacob to let him go after at first rejecting the request of the older brothers (see Q.12:11–2). The introductory part of this composition is in syllabic form that has been likened to the poetry found in the *Book of Dede Qorqud*, a collection of epic tales from the pre-Islamic era of the nomadic Oghuz Turks.[86]

The *Spring Time Ode* is also the first of three poems in which Rabghūzī adds his signature:

> The dark-eyed houris of Paradise wave their sleeves in approval
> When Nāṣir Rabghūzī recites an ode to spring like this.[87]

Meanwhile, lyrical poems put into the mouth of Zulaikhā are essentially poems of love and longing that enhance the story's romantic atmosphere and attest to the sincerity, even helpless inevitability, of Zulaikhā's love for Joseph.[88] So, for example, in "Zulaikhā sees Joseph":

> Out of melancholy and longing for his beauty,
> My liver roasts and is aflame; my dear tears stream like a torrent.[89]

Rabghūzī further develops the theme of love and suffering in this and one other *ghazal*, two of three occasions in the Story of Joseph in which Rabghūzī writes himself into the final lines of verse. Both poems consist of alternating Arabic and Türki couplets where the rhyme is created by macaronic word play,[90] thus creating a sound-binding between the two languages. Interlingual coherence is also evident at the level of meaning. Consider the last two couplets of the *ghazal* Zulaikhā recites when Joseph turns to flee away from her:

> *ḥāfanā l-maʿšūqu ḥayfan fa-rtaḍaynā ǧawrahu*
> *qādanā l-aḥbābu nuṣḥan mā ṭabiʿnā l-qāʾidīn*

84 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:168-169.
85 Ibid., 2:142-144.
86 Boeschoten and van Damme, "Poetry," 12.
87 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:144.
88 These poems are named by the editors of the critical text edition as: "Zulaikhā sees Joseph" (2:160-161), "Zulaikhā praises the garden" (2:167), "Ghazal" (2:174-175), and "Zulaikhā rejoices at the consummation of her marriage to Joseph" (2:228-229).
89 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:161.
90 Dankoff, "Review of Al-Rabghūzī," 118.

Rąbġuzi qụl Naṣịrụ d-din ṭąbʿï törlüg söz tüzär
Kụ̈lcịrib ą̈srük öläs köz bąqsa qiymac qašïdïn[91]

Translation:

The beloved has treated us unjustly, but we are content with his cruelty.
The lovers have given us good advice; we have not listened to them.
It is only natural for the servant Nāṣir ad-Dīn Rabghūzī to compose all manner of words,
When [the Prince] smiles and a drunken eye looks playfully from his brow with a friendly gaze.[92]

Rabghūzī rather mischievously but earnestly declares his love for his patron, transposing himself into a "Zulaikhā" and casting Toqbuqa as his "Joseph." In this piece reminiscent of amatory verse, Rabghūzī links the lover's abasement motif, expressed in the canonical language (Arabic), with the slave-lord hierarchy characteristic of the Perso-Islamic courtly idiom,[93] which he then communicates in a personalised way in the Türki language. He sets the scene with Arabic prestige verse then Turkicises the emotional message for his audience.

In this way, Rabghūzī not only links the notion of complete loyalty highly valued in Turko-Mongol social ethics with the motif of courtly love, he echoes the religious thought of the kind found in the writings of ʿAṭṭār.[94] This is even more evident in the final two couplets of "Zulaikhā sees Joseph":

Whenever I ask him for a kiss to quench my thirst,
He only replies with insults and my heart is depressed and broken.
When [the prince] chases him away, Nāṣir Rabghūzī doesn't turn his back on love;
No matter how much the prince is displeased and utters abuse, when he lacerates the slave's heart.[95]

The affliction (*muṣībah*) of the insulted lover is the very sign of true love; the beloved's rebuke binds the slave more tightly to the lord. In ʿAṭṭār's *Muṣībat-nāma* ("Book of Suffering") the same pattern characterises the relationship between God (the Beloved) and his humble servant (the lover).[96]

Echoes of ʿAṭṭār's "Story of the Moths" in his *Manṭiq al-Ṭayr* (The Conference of the Birds)—in which the moth's plunge into the candle's flame allegorises the seeker's annihilation of the self in the Beloved—are noted in the preface to the *ghazal* "Zulaikhā sees Joseph,"[97] and are likewise discernible in the short Arabic poem in *baṣīṭ* metre that Rabghūzī

91 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 1:152-153.
92 Ibid., 2:175.
93 Julie Scott Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry* (Princeton University Press, 1987), especially 254–57.
94 See, for instance, Hellmutt Ritter, *The Ocean of the Soul: Men, the World and God in the Stories of Farīd Al-Dīn ʿaṭṭār*, trans. John O'Kane (Brill, 2003), 382–86.
95 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:161.
96 Navid Kermani, *The Terror of God: Attar, Job and the Metaphysical Revolt*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Polity, 2011), 155–63.
97 Agnès Kefeli, "The Tale of Joseph and Zulaykha on the Volga Frontier: The Struggle for Gender, Religious, and National Identity in Imperial and Postrevolutionary Russia," *Slavic Review* 70, no. 2 (2011): 386.

employs when extending the moth-to-flame metaphor to encompass all the women invited to Zulaikhā's banquet.[98]

The theme of spiritual transformation through suffering and self-effacement hinted at in these poems becomes explicit in the extra-Qurʾānic story "How Zulaikhā was United with the Prophet Joseph, *peace be upon him*" that Rabghūzī will go on to tell.[99]

THE MYSTICAL STORY OF JOSEPH AND ZULAIKHĀ

As we have noted, the Turks and Mongols of Rabghūzī's day were increasingly drawn to an inwardly oriented and mystical form of Islam. In the story of Joseph, Rabghūzī found an ideal vehicle through which to engage this sensibility, drawing on the Persian Sufi reinterpretation of "Joseph and Zulaikhā" as a mystical romance—a tradition that would attain its most fully developed classical expression in the Persian poet Jāmī's (d. 898 AH/1492 CE) *Yūsuf u Zulaikhā*.

Thaʿlabī and Kisāʾī briefly narrate the marriage of Joseph and Zulaikhā (Thaʿlabī calls her "Rāʿīl") upon his accession to high office in Egypt.[100] Both record that Joseph was rewarded with a wife who was then a true believer and still, after all, a virgin. Rabghūzī, however, follows Nīshābūrī in making this a much grander story, placing it under a separate heading at the end of the whole Joseph account.[101] Further, he seems to have taken up the main elements of Nīshābūrī's story, enhanced them with further detail and then integrated them with other material including related traditions, an anecdote, one more poem and an explanation of how God preserves the sanctity of all those destined to be wives of prophets.

In the following example we see Rabghūzī's elaboration on Nīshābūrī's text, which includes insertion of Qurʾānic verses. It also shows something of the Sufi flavour and the entertaining, sometimes humorous, nature of the storytelling:

> It has come down in traditions: When Joseph approached her, Zulaikhā ran away. Joseph said: "Oh Zulaikhā, until now I was running from you and you were chasing me. Now what has happened, that I'm chasing you and you're running away?" Zulaikhā replied: "Before this I had seen a gracious one and was thrilled by him. Now I've found the Gracious One and have taken refuge with Him." *In His words, He is exalted:* "*He is gracious and all-knowing*" (Q.6:103). "That day when I beheld glory, I lost my heart. Today I've found the Glorious One; I've joined Him." *In His words, He is exalted:* "*He is the Glorious One, the Merciful*" (Q.30:4).
>
> It has been related: Once Joseph approached Zulaikhā; he tried to catch her. Zulaikhā ran away and Joseph chased after her. He caught hold of the back of Zulaikhā's skirt. When he pulled at it, it tore. Zulaikhā turned around and said: "*Oh Joseph, this is a shirt for a shirt*." That is: "This shirt was torn in place of the other shirt."[102]

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98 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:183.
99 Ibid., 2:225.
100 Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 212; Kisaʿī, *Tales of the Prophets*, 179–80.
101 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:225-229. Compare with Naysābūrī, *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ*, 145–49.
102 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:227. Compare with Naysābūrī, *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ*, 148.

Earlier, when the king of Egypt demanded an explanation for Joseph's imprisonment, Zulaikhā had said, "Oh king, until now my love has been **mąğazi**…Now my love is **ḥąqiqąt**."[103] Rabghūzī alludes to the Sufi concept of *majāzī* (unreal/earthly) love as preparatory to *haqīqī* (real/heavenly) love.[104] But the path to being united with the prophet was also the path to unity with God. Zulaikhā would suffer greatly before being restored to an even better state, and it was only after she had become enthralled with the love of God that she and Joseph would consummate their marriage. In short, Joseph the prophet becomes a type of mystic saint,[105] while Zulaikhā becomes an example of a Sufi disciple moving along the path to unity with God.[106]

Agnès Kefeli has shown that Rabghūzī's story of Joseph and Zulaikhā has much in common with the mystical *Qiṣṣa-i Yūsuf*, written (in a language close to that of Rabghūzī) by Qul ʿAlī. Steven L. West (who accepts a 13th century date) says that *Qiṣṣa-i Yūsuf* "represents as well as any other Turkic literary work the bringing of the world of Islam to the world of the rapidly converting Turks of Central Asia in the formative period of their Islamic cultural history."[107] Even if, given the uncertainty surrounding the date and provenance of the work, we must be cautious about making this claim in respect of *Qiṣṣa-i Yūsuf*,[108] when it comes to Rabghuzi's work such a claim is highly suggestive. In any case, as Kefeli writes: "In both Qul 'Ali's and Rabghuzi's work, Zulaykha served as an extraordinary model of Sufi practice in an overwhelmingly pagan environment."[109]

The inherent tension in the Sufi representation of women is also present in Rabghūzī's story. Rabghūzī's Türki translation generalises Potiphar's criticism of his wife to all women: "*Your cunning is great indeed*" (Q.12:28) becomes "The cunning of women is great." He goes on to explain how it could be that the cunning of women is great while Satan's cunning is weak (Q.4:76).[110] On the other hand, Rabghūzī will elsewhere quote the *ḥadīth*:

> *The Prophet, peace be upon him, said:* "*Three things from Your world have been made pleasant unto me: perfume, and women, and ritual prayer has been made a joy for me*."[111]

The position of women in Turko-Mongol society and across the wider Mongol empire was also notably ambivalent. Sedentary communities often imposed stricter limits on women, but the demands of steppe life meant that women frequently worked alongside men and at times even took part in battle. During the imperial era, several exceptional women governed

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103 My rendering. The English translation of the second sentence does not appear in the published translation. See Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 1:166/2:192.

104 Ritter, *Ocean of the Soul*, 450.

105 Thackston (Kisaʿī, *Tales of the Prophets*, xviii) mentions that one of the reasons for the popularity of stories of the prophets in central Asia was that Sufism in these areas drew on biblical prophets as prototype mystic saints.

106 Kefeli, "Joseph and Zulaykha," 386–87.

107 Steven L. West, "The Qiṣṣa-i Yūsuf of ʿAlī: The First Story of Joseph in Turkic Islamic Literature," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 37, no. 1-3 (1983): 69.

108 DeWeese, "Turkic and Chaghatay Sources," 283.

109 Kefeli, "Joseph and Zulaykha," 386.

110 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:178.

111 Ibid., 2:172. However, Rabghūzī renders the word "women" in Arabic as "women of true faith" in Türki!

regions—or even the empire as a whole—typically as regents. Yet, women could also be treated as property, and wealthy men might take multiple wives; on a man's death, his lesser wives often passed to his sons unless they had the means to resist.[112]

In view of these intersecting tensions within the story and the society Rabghūzī addressed, Kefeli's assessment is particularly apt: "Without disregarding older interpretations of the Joseph story, Rabghuzi opted for a narrative that could potentially please and empower a female audience living in a hybrid milieu, in which Islam must compete with other religions."[113]

THEMES, BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

In this section I will describe the way Rabghūzī handles a few of the themes, beliefs and practices that he explores in his story about Joseph.

Rabghūzī's interest in reporting conversions and the call to faith is striking. The most prominent conversion story is, of course, that of Zulaikhā, who, as we have just seen, becomes a model of faith and conduct for women living in a religiously diverse environment. Of course, the one clear instance in Surah 12 of the call to faith, curiously ignored in the Eisenberg text of Kisāʾī,[114] is enthusiastically narrated by Rabghūzī: "It occurred to Joseph first to call them to faith so that they might become true believers."[115] In a tradition about the Prophet included at the beginning of the story, a Jewish interlocutor promises to convert if the Prophet is able to name the 11 stars of Joseph's second dream. While Thaʿlabī stops where the reporter Jābir b. ʿAbdallāh apparently stops—"The Jew said, 'These are their names, by God,'"[116]—Rabghūzī is emphatic and explicit—"The Jew said: 'By God! I have read it exactly like this in the Torah', and he embraced the faith."[117]

Rabghūzī builds on a tradition about the word *bushrā* in Q.12:19[118] to introduce two Abyssinian slaves, Bashīr and Bushrā, who pull Joseph out of the well and then become true believers after Joseph urges them to worship only the One Creator God.[119] This conversion, according to Rabghūzī, was God's eternal purpose in having Joseph thrown into the well.[120] Finally, after Jacob migrates to Egypt, numerous people, including the king of Egypt, come

112 George Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire* (Hackett, 2006), 227–32.
113 Kefeli, "Joseph and Zulaykha," 388. For a feminist critique of various representations of the story of Joseph and Zulaikhā, although not including Rabghūzī's, see Merguerian and Najmabadi, "Zulaykha and Yusuf," 485–508.
114 There is at least one much longer text of Kisāʾī than the Eisenberg text upon which Thackston based his translation. See Helen Blatherwick, "Textual Silences and Literary Choices in al-Kisāʾī's Account of the Annunciation and the Birth of Jesus," *Arabica* 66, no. 1 (2019): 4–6.
115 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:186 cf. Q.12:37–40.
116 Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 186–87.
117 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:141.
118 See William M. Brinner, *The History of Al-Ṭabarī Vol. 2: Prophets and Patriarchs* (SUNY Press, 1987), 151–52.
119 Joseph also turns the Abyssinian slaves white by stroking their faces.
120 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:149–50, 152.

before him to embrace Islam.[121] It is difficult to escape the impression that Rabghūzī wants his audience to make sure they have embraced the faith and are active in calling others to Islam.

Rabghūzī also takes other parts of the story as allegorical anticipations of eschatological realities. He announces "the glad tidings" that, just as Joseph's fellow prison inmates were set free by the king through his intervention, so also it will not be remarkable if God releases believers from Hell "because of the intervention of Muḥammad."[122] Later, Rabghūzī says that, in the same way Joseph dealt with his brothers when he was prince of Egypt, so also on Judgment Day the Lord will "frighten all his servants with the fire of Hell" before showing kindness in allowing them into Paradise.[123]

Refutation of supposed Christian doctrine comes in connection with what Rabghūzī calls "one of the veils of humanity;" that is, the veil of fatherhood. That Jesus was without an earthly father simply draws back the veil on the reality that every person is ultimately brought into being by God. Only the deluded draw the conclusion that the Almighty took Mary as his spouse and that Jesus is their son.[124]

Rabghūzī includes a story about a Bedouin on a camel who becomes a communication link between Joseph in Potiphar's house in the city of Egypt and his grieving father Jacob back in Canaan. The story can also be found in briefer form in Kisāʾī, and with significant differences in setting and detail in *Qiṣṣa-i Yūsuf*.[125] In Rabghūzī and Kisāʾī, the Bedouin, who is from Canaan, tells Joseph of Jacob's ongoing sorrow, then returns to Canaan to bring Jacob the news that Joseph is alive. What is unique in Rabghūzī is that he has proleptically introduced this enigmatic figure earlier, when Joseph was in the slave market. In this earlier part, which Rabghūzī attributes to "[A]mmarite stories," the Bedouin is depicted "riding like the wind and clouds" until he pulls up in the middle of the buying and selling of Joseph to utter the words, "I don't understand what arrangement there is in the Almighty's decree, in the ordainment of the Lord, *He is mighty and glorious*." The Bedouin had given the camel its head, and Rabghūzī relates a tradition that the camel had caught Joseph's scent and travelled continuously for three days just to see him.[126] Only later do we, and the Bedouin, discover God's design in bringing him to Egypt. In this story, then, an enigmatic nomad is ordained to connect Joseph with Jacob, city with countryside—and God uses a camel's obsession with Joseph to call him to this task.

Rabghūzī's interest in the theme of deliverance from various kinds of calamities is signalled in his ninth answer to the question about what makes the Story of Joseph "the best of stories." He mentions the surahs that should be recited for deliverance from different kinds of calamities, but, for deliverance from all ten kinds of calamities, one may recite Surah Yūsuf since it

121 Ibid., 2:223–24.
122 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:194. Nīshābūrī takes a different episode as analogous to the explanation for Muḥammad's ability to perform an intercessory role on Judgement Day. See Naysābūrī, *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ*, 103.
123 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:216.
124 Ibid., 2:158.
125 Kisaʿī, *Tales of the Prophets*, 172–73; Kol Gali, *The Story of Joseph: Kyssa'i Yusuf*, trans. Fred Beake and Ravil Bukharaev (Global Oriental, 2010), 107–14.
126 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:164-166.

"contains all calamities together."[127] Throughout the story, Rabghūzī records three prayers for deliverance given to Joseph by Gabriel, two of which he encourages his readers to apply in their own lives. The first is given to Joseph when he is in the well. Rabghūzī records the prayer in Arabic only and then reports a tradition relating that God will deliver the one who recites the same prayer.[128] The second is given to Joseph to pray on behalf of the repentant but childless slave trader Mālik Dhuʿr. After recording this prayer, Rabghūzī writes, "Oh you, who have no sons or daughters, or, if you do, they are not in accordance with your desire: purify your inner self, polish your faith and pronounce these words." Then he provides a free translation of the meaning of the prayer in Türki.[129]

We saw earlier that Rabghūzī drew on several Qurʾānic verses in his elaboration of the concept of the evil eye. This extended discussion comprises three units he calls **ḥikāyat** ("anecdotes"), followed by no fewer than four consecutive question-and-answer exchanges. The third **ḥikāyat** is remarkable:

> An old woman went to the Prophet, *peace be upon him*, and said: "Oh Messenger of God, we tend cattle and livestock in the plains so that our wealth will increase. But it doesn't increase." The Prophet said: "Sell the cattle and livestock; mix with the people and sow crops. Plant scabious amid your crops." They did as the Prophet said and they became prosperous.[130]

This appears to be a distinctly Turkic narrative interpolation that bears no relationship to the Arabic corpus. It also touches directly on one of the defining socio-economic divides of Rabghūzī's milieu: that between nomadic pastoralists and the sedentary agrarian population. Although Rabghūzī elsewhere shows considerable sympathy for steppe life, in this instance he presents the agrarian mode as the more effective path to material increase. However, if Rabghuzi's method was one of persuasion, Tarmashirin, who ruled the Chaghatay khanate some two decades later, took things much further. One of the reasons for his deposition was the charge that he compelled resistant Mongols to adopt agriculture.[131]

There is one further point to note. In explaining why scabious is said to ward off the evil eye from the crops when it has no intrinsic power to do so, Rabghūzī teaches an *ʿadạt* ("custom") of the Arabs: "Sometimes they attach the attribute to the secondary cause of an action, and other times to the agent."[132]

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127 Ibid., 2:138.

128 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:148–49. There is a similar prayer in Thaʿlabī, *ʿArāʾis*, 191, one of the differences in Rabghuzi being the presence of the mystical request "make Your love known in my heart, so that there is no concern in me [for anyone but You] and no recollection of anyone but You."

129 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:163.

130 Ibid., 2:200.

131 Biran, "Chaghadaids and Islam," 742–52.

132 Rabghūzī, *Stories of the Prophets*, 2:200.

THE CLEAREST POINT

At the end of the story of Joseph and Zulaikhā, Rabghūzī returns to the Qurʾānic account of Joseph's *mulk* ("dominion"), his acknowledgment of God's sovereign provision and his petition to die in the true faith. After narrating Joseph's burial, Rabghūzī closes the story with a short but emphatic summation:

> This Story contains many instructive points, but they are not all fit to be told. The clearest point is that a person should not have a bad opinion of Joseph's brothers because of what they did. Joseph forgave his brothers. The Lord, He is exalted, pardoned them all and caused them to join their grandfather. To blame them in these matters amounts to bringing about one's own destruction. For this affair is a matter of the hidden realm.[133]

Rabghūzī is not, of course, the first to highlight the importance of forgiveness in the Joseph narrative. What is striking is the distinctive framing he gives to this theme. His primary application is not simply that one should forgive, but that one must not persist in a bad opinion toward those whom God has forgiven. "To blame them" (more literally, "to speak unfittingly about them") for past misdeeds is to trespass upon the hidden workings of the Almighty. Rabghūzī thus identifies a specifically Islamic posture toward reconciliation: the community must refrain from nursing suspicion or resentment against repentant offenders because doing so presumes to know what God has already resolved.

Within Rabghūzī's historical moment, this takes on particular force. The Chinggisid house was riven by succession disputes, political betrayal, violent coups, and, increasingly, religious division. Rabghūzī's "clearest point" thus reads as a direct appeal to the princes and factions of the Mongol ruling house: just as one must not look with contempt upon the sons of Jacob, whose misdeeds and subsequent pardon lie within the Divine plan, so too must the sons of Chinggis Khan refrain from condemning rivals whom God has forgiven, or may yet forgive. Reconciliation is framed as a distinctly Islamic discipline, grounded not in abstract moralising but in a concrete pattern embodied in Joseph's life and made available, through the story, to Rabghūzī's contemporaries.

Yet this exhortation is only the tip of the spear. The ability of the Chinggisids to achieve a Joseph-style reconciliation and thereby form a prosperous, peaceful, and Islamic polity depends on adopting the full range of lessons embedded in Rabghūzī's portrayal of Joseph. Joseph's story is not simply one of familial forgiveness but a model of magnanimous kingship and faithful leadership under God. Rabghūzī has not concealed Joseph's flaws—his moments of presumption or impetuousness—but he emphasises that God rescued Joseph from error, provided for him, and endowed him with wisdom. Joseph became the just and equitable ruler of a great nation, liberating those who had sold themselves into bondage, saving lives, and winning the willing loyalty of an entire people.

Joseph also exemplifies faithfulness in a pagan or religiously mixed environment. He preaches truth without coercion, waits patiently for God's vindication, and works quietly but

133 Ibid., 2:231.

purposefully toward the establishment of righteous order. For Rabghūzī's patron Toqbuqa and the Mongol elite, Joseph thus stands as an ideal model of rule in their context—a paradigm not of abrupt coercive Islamisation, but of steadfastness, justice, generosity, and confident reliance on God's timing.

Rabghūzī's "clearest point," then, is not an isolated moral but the distilled expression of a broader vision: a call for Mongol rulers to let reconciliation take root through the virtues Joseph embodies, so an authentically Islamic polity might emerge from their fractured world.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown how Rabghūzī created an expansive and innovative example of the *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* tradition. While indebted to the works of figures such as Thaʿlabī and Nīshābūrī, and the common stock of Prophetic traditions, commentary and historiography, Rabghūzī adds layers of local traditions and references, lyric poetry, mystical insight, and pedagogical innovation. His distinctive elaborations can be related to the needs of his time and place: a mixed Turko-Mongol society in various stages of becoming Islamic, and a Chinggisid elite wrestling with questions of moral legitimacy, political unity, and religious identity.

Rabghūzī's achievement lies not only in making Qurʾānic material and Arabic lore accessible in Türki, but also in his careful selection and presentation of narrative elements designed to engage and instruct audiences ranging from newly Islamising pastoralists to urban Muslims and Sufi-influenced seekers. He transforms terse Qurʾānic notices into vivid episodes, expands summary speeches into full dialogues, fills narrative silences with purposeful detail, and punctuates the story with teaching moments that convey the basic beliefs, practices, and devotional sensibilities of Islam in memorable form. Emotions and affections are engaged with lyric poetry and Sufi themes. Set prayers, ethical and theological principles, and insights into Arab-Islamic culture are conveyed through the storytelling. One can imagine the whole book of *Qiṣaṣ i-Rabghūzī* functioning, in practice, as a kind of one-volume guide to being a Muslim in Mongol Central Asia—an omnibus that could, for many, take on the functional role of scripture.

The long reception history of the work demonstrates its resonance: Rabghūzī's *Qiṣaṣ* circulated widely and continuously across the Turko-Mongol world, from the Danube to the Tarim Basin. The Story of Joseph touched the major concerns of medieval Central Asian life, but Rabghūzī shaped these themes into something more: an epic narrative reminiscent of the stories told about Turkic heroes and Sufi saints. In doing so, Rabghūzī offered Islam to the masses in a familiar literary form while simultaneously appealing to the Mongol elites, urging them to legitimate their authority as Islamic rulers. It is reasonable to conclude that Rabghūzī's aim was not only to teach the foundations of Islam, but also to hold before his patron Toqbuqa—and the Mongol elites generally—a model of Joseph-like kingship: faithful, just, magnanimous, and capable of leading a fractured realm toward a peaceful and genuinely Islamic polity.

APPENDIX

Rabghūzī's story of Joseph can be divided into 14 major sections:

1. Joseph's dreams and the rupture with his brothers.
2. Joseph in the well.
3. Joseph sold to slave trader Mālik.
4. Joseph sold in Egypt.
5. Joseph and Zulaikhā 1 – scandal.
6. Joseph in prison.
7. Joseph in charge.
8. Joseph's brothers' first journey to Egypt.
9. Joseph's brothers' second journey to Egypt – with Benjamin.
10. Joseph's brothers' third journey to Egypt – reconciliation.
11. Joseph reunited with his father Jacob.
12. Joseph's dream comes true.
13. Joseph and Zulaikhā 2 – reunion and marriage.
14. Epilogue – the death of Jacob and Joseph.

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