



Document of the Month 9/25: An Early “Joseph and Zulaykha”

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The Oldest Fragment of *Joseph and Zulaykha* in Persian?

by Gabrielle van den Berg

Firuzkuh 81, kept in the National Library of Afghanistan, contains Persian verses that come from an unknown narrative poem on Joseph. Based on its handwriting and spelling the fragment can be dated to the 11th century, making it the earliest surviving narrative poem about him in Persian. The preserved text covers a crucial moment of the story, when Joseph is being sold by his brothers to a rich merchant and is about to be separated from them. In the many later versions of the story of Joseph in Persian, this marks the culmination of a painful episode in which Joseph’s jealous brothers decide to get rid of him and to throw him into a pit, as described in the primary source for the story, sura 12 of the Qur’an (*sūrat Yūsuf*). This sura stands out for being the longest sura in the Qur’an and the only one that presents a complete story in itself. On the basis of the narrative in sura 12, the story was elaborated, adapted and embellished in Persian, as well as in other languages, and many new storylines were added to it, both in poetry and in prose.

The story of Joseph

In a nutshell, the story of Joseph in the Muslim tradition runs as follows: Joseph was the eleventh son of Jacob, the first son Jacob had with his wife Rachel, and, together with his younger brother, his father’s favourite. Once, Joseph had a dream in which eleven stars, the sun and the moon prostrated before him. Jacob urged him not to speak about this dream, and told him that God would make the dream’s meaning clear in due course. Still, the older brothers’ anger and jealousy were roused, and they persuaded their father to let them take Joseph with them when they went herding their flocks, conspiring to get rid of him and regain their father’s favour. As soon as they set off, they confronted Joseph with their sharp dislike, and one of the brothers, Simeon, even hit him. At first, they plotted to kill him, but one of the brothers convinced the others to throw him into a pit and leave him there, whilst telling their father that a wolf had devoured him. And so, they threw Joseph into a pit, where he stayed for some time. In many versions of the story, but not in the Qur’an, Joseph was visited and supported in the pit by the angel Gabriel, as confirmation of his status as a prophet. Gabriel urged him not to lose courage. And indeed, after some days, a caravan passed by, and in search for water, they reached the pit and found Joseph. The merchants in the caravan planned to take him with them, but the brothers, who were not far away, intervened and instead sold their brother to the leading merchant, a man named Mālik. Thereafter, Joseph was sold as a slave to a rich man in Egypt, whose wife, Zulaykha, tried to seduce him. Falsely accused but proven innocent, Joseph still ended up in prison, where his talent for interpreting dreams brought him to the court of the Pharaoh and ultimately, to supreme power in Egypt. In that position, he met again with his brothers, and in the end was reunited with his father Jacob.

In Persian prose, this narrative is included in “Stories of the Prophets” (*Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’*), a genre that became popular in Persian from the 11th century onwards. A well-known collection was compiled by Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm ibn Manṣūr Naysābūrī (11th century). The painting in Figure 1 comes from a 16th-century manuscript of Naysābūrī’s *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’*, and shows Joseph, depicted with a fiery halo in recognition of his prophethood, being rescued from the pit.



باین

Fig. 1: Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā' ("Stories of the Prophets"), Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm ibn Maṣṣūr Naysābūrī (11th century). Qazvin?, Iran, ca. 1580. New York Public Library, Spencer Coll. Pers. Ms 46, fol. 43v. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/3b435ff0-edc7-0135-03e8-0ad4582ea249>. Public domain.

The text surrounding this painting reads:

"They came and sent someone for water. When the bucket was lowered into the well, Joseph, peace be upon him, rose, sat in the bucket and tied his hands firmly with the rope.

When they hauled up the bucket, they saw Joseph."

The verses handed down in Firuzkuh 81 narrate the events immediately following the rescue of Joseph from the pit.

Firuzkuh 81: transcription and translation

Transcription and translation by the Invisible East team, with slight adaptations by the author

Firuzkuh 81, recto (Figure 2)

1. [2 +/-] بگفت؟ شمعون درم پسندیدم بتو فروشم این را کی بس بلا دیدم [م]

2. [3 +/-] ه درم و بسنگ هفده بود خرید یوسف تاش آمد سوذ

3. [3 +/-] گف/نوشت/فروخ؟ بتند آنگه برین کی بندی ماست فروختیم برین بر خدای عرش گواست

4. [4 +/-] این را ببند بر بندها مگر کی {از تو} گریزد شود درو رنجها

5. [5 +/-] ذ از اول شب [بگفت؟] مالک یوسف را ای گزیدهی رب

6. [7 +/-] [3 +/-] ت بنزدیک من مرایشان را

7. [7 +/-] [4 +/-] اهی ز منت نهفته و گاه (?)

1. [+/-2] Simeon [said?], I accepted the dirhams I sell him to you, for I have only had trouble with him
2. [+/-2 17?] dirhams which weighed 17 stones bought Joseph so that he may make a profit
3. Then [+/-2 he wrote (a receipt)?] [that said], "because he is our prisoner. We sold him thus, God of the throne is our witness
4. [+/-3] tie him up in bonds lest he should escape, and cause distress"
5. [+/-5] from the early night Mālik [said?] to Joseph, "O Lord's chosen one,
6. [+/-7] [+/-2 bring?] him close to me,
7. [+/-7] [+/-4] hidden from me at times (?)



Fig. 2: Afghanistan National Archives, Firuzkuh 81, recto (image courtesy of Nabi Saqee). Full details of the document can be found in the Invisible East Digital Corpus.

Firuzkuh 81, verso (Figure 3)

1. ایا یهودا رفتم ترا سلامت باد ز عقل تان بشما بر (؟) کفو (؟) [2 +/-]
2. ایا یهودا درد جدایی از پدرم همی بسوزد زین درد و زبر [1 +/-]
3. بران ضعیف پدر (؟) رحم کن بهرکاری منه بران دل مسکین او (؟) [1 +] [آزاری]
4. برفت یوسف گریان و دیگران گریان همی شدی از انده [4 +/-]
5. غلام بسته مرورا بنزد [2 +/-] چنانک [5 +/-]
6. بر اشترش نشاند [3 +/-] [6 +/-]
7. [6 +/-] [6 +/-]

1. "O Judah, I am gone, farewell! your conscience [shall reprimand?]

you [+/-2]

2. O Judah, the pain of separation from my father [?] burns from this pain [+/-4]

3. Upon [my] weak father, always have mercy do not lodge [+1] [grief] in his

wretched heart."

4. Joseph left in tears and the others cried leaving, in despair [+/-4]

5. The slave bound him, and [took] him to [+/-2] such that [+/-5]

6. He seated him on a camel [+/-3] [+/-6]

7. [+/-6] [+/-6]

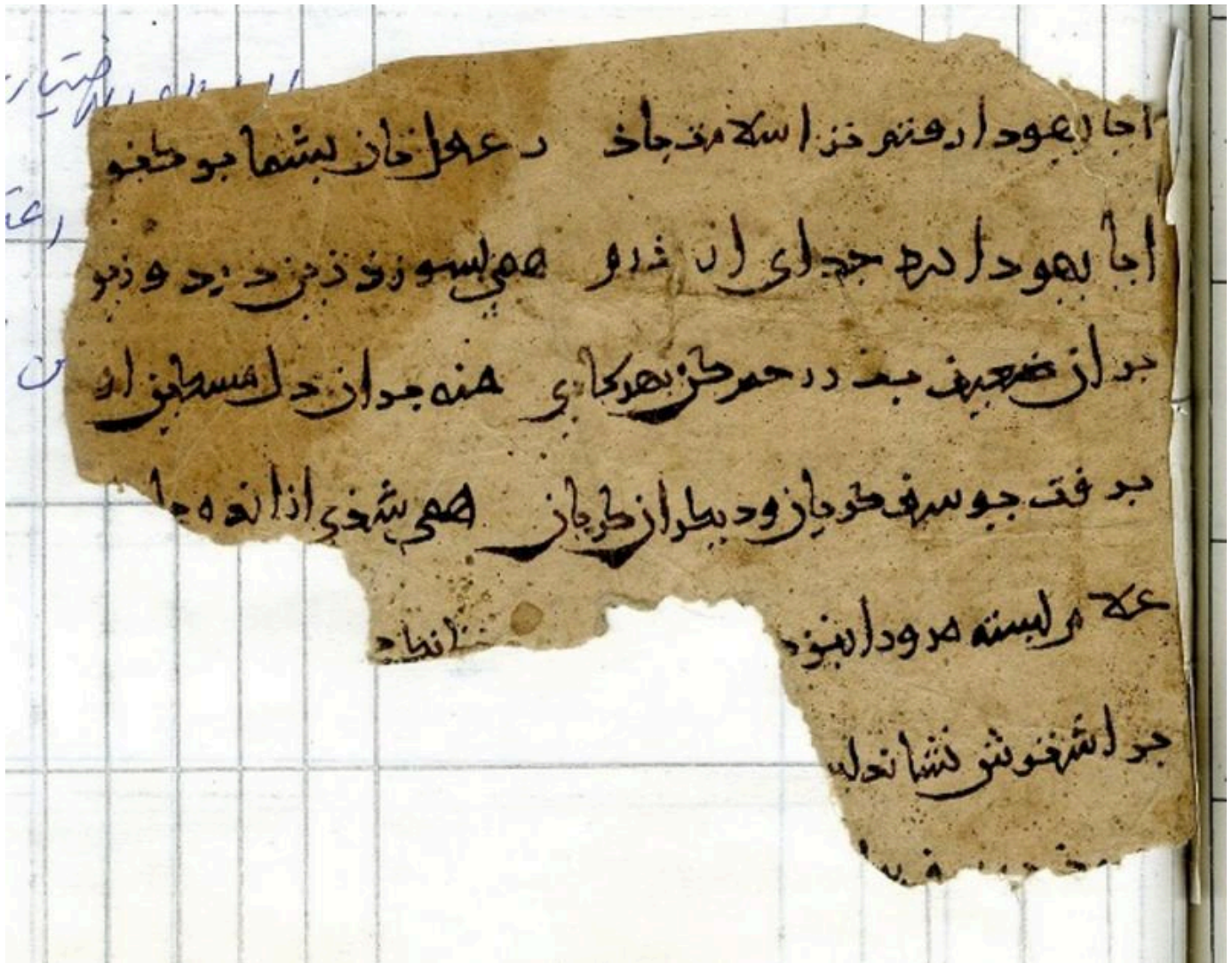


Fig. 3: Afghanistan National Archives, Firuzkuh 81, verso (image courtesy of Nabi Saqee). Full details of the document can be found in the Invisible East Digital Corpus.

Identification of the poem: the contents

In Firuzkuh 81, fourteen verses are preserved, seven on each side of the document. Each verse is written on its own line and is divided into two halves by a blank space. In what follows, the first half of a verse is referred to as "a", and the second half - "b". Unfortunately, none of the verses is complete, and a more coherent transcription or translation than the above cannot be provided. Either the beginning or the end of each verse is missing, and of some verses, only a few words have remained. Moreover, not all words are fully legible. Still, the fragment contains a lot of information. Most crucially, some names are given, notably that of Yūsuf (Joseph), which occurs twice on the recto side of the document (verses 2b and 5b) and once on the verso side (4a). Furthermore, there are the names of two brothers: Shim‘ūn (Simeon), the second

son of Jacob, in verse 1a on the recto side, and Yahūdā (Judah), the fourth son of Jacob, in verses 1a and 2a on the verso side. According to tradition, Simeon was particularly jealous and harsh towards Joseph, while Judah was the one who preferred selling Joseph to the caravan merchants to having him killed in the pit.

The recto side of the document speaks of a business transaction: the words for selling (*furūsham*, "I sell", verse 1b), buying (*kharīdh* "he bought", verse 2b), and dirham (verses 1a and 2a) occur. This transaction is led by Simeon, and his business partner Mālik, the leading merchant of the caravan, is also mentioned in verse 5b. In verse 4a, words for ties and binding can be read (*biband bar bandhā* "bind in fetters"), followed in 4b by a reference to Joseph as liable to escape (*gurīzad* "he may escape") and cause trouble (*ranjhā* "pains"): *magar kī [az tu] gurīzad shavad dar ū ranjhā* – "lest he should escape [from you], and cause distress." Inserted after the second word of verse 4b, we read the added words *az tu*, "from you" written in a different hand with ink of a more brownish colour than the rest of the text. These words are a necessary part of the verse: without them, the metre does not work (more on the metre below). This is one of three such corrections/additions on the recto side of the document (Figure 4). Verse 4b connects with 1b, in which Simeon states that he sells Joseph because the latter has caused him much misfortune (*bas balā*). These contents align well with Naysābūrī's *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'*, where even the same price of 17 dirhams is given (cf. recto, verse 2a).¹ Interestingly, in verse 5b, Mālik the merchant addresses Joseph as "O Lord's chosen one" (*ay guzīda-yi rabb*), which may indicate that Gabriel's visitation, while Joseph sat hopeless in the pit, was part of this otherwise unknown versification.

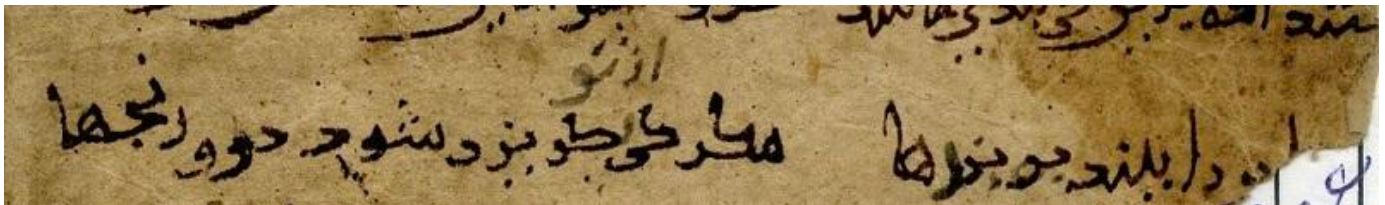


Fig. 4: Detail of Afghanistan National Archives, Firuzkuh 81, recto, showing corrections in a different hand and ink.

On the verso side of the document, Judah is addressed, and references are made to the sad state of their father Jacob, who is not mentioned by name but only as "father" (*pidhar*, 2a and 3a). The first four half verses (1a to 4a) are complete and fairly legible and describe the heartbreaking separation of Joseph from his brother Judah, with whom he is apparently allowed to exchange a few words before being seated on a camel (*bar ushtur-ash nishānd* "he was seated on a camel", verse 6a). This is the last legible part of the fragment. We can assume that, after taking leave from Judah, in the now-missing part Joseph is carried away by the merchants, on his way to Egypt, where he will be sold to a rich Egyptian, the husband of the temptress Zulaykha.

The form of the poem: rhyme scheme, meter, orthography

As mentioned above, the verses in the fragment are formally divided into two halves, separated by a space (see Figures 2 and 3). This is the regular way in which Persian poetry is organized, and the rhyme scheme further defines the poetic genre. In this case, it is clear that the verses belong to a so-called *mathnawī*, the major form of narrative poetry in Persian. In a *mathnawī*, each verse is formed of two rhyming half verses, which generates a rhyme scheme a-a, b-b, c-c, etc. This rhyme scheme is clear on recto, especially in the better-preserved verses 2–5. In verse 2, the two half verses end in *-ūdh*: *būdh* – *sūdh*; in verse 3 we see *-ā-st*: *mā-st* – *guvā-st*; in verse 4 it is *-hā*: *bandhā* – *ranjhā* and in verse 5 *-ab*: *shab* – *rab*.

In addition to the rhyme, metre is also very important in Persian poetry, and many different metres exist. The poet of the verses in Firuzkuh 81 chose the metre *mujtathth*, which is not very common in *mathnawī* narrative poems, at least in the later periods.²

The early dating of this fragment is also supported by its handwriting and orthography, especially the regular occurrence of the so-called "Persian *dhāl*". This refers to the pronunciation of 'd' as 'dh' in Persian words when it follows a vowel or diphthong within the same morpheme. We see this for example in verse 1a on recto in the word *pisandīdham*. In verse 2 this post-vocalic *dhāl* occurs four times, in *būdh*, *kharīdh*, *āmadh* and *sūdh* (Figure 5). Significantly, the "Persian *dhāl*" is common in manuscripts only until the middle of the thirteenth century.



Fig. 5: Detail of Afghanistan National Archives, Firuzkuh 81, recto, showing the words *būd*, *kharīdh* spelled with the so-called Persian *dhāl*, instead of the later forms *būd* and *kharīd*.

The contents and the formal aspects of the verses in the fragment make it clear that the text belongs to a *mathnawī* narrative poem, composed in the metre *mujtathth*, and that the *mathnawī* is about Joseph. Hence, we can assume that the fragment offers a glimpse of a very early example of a *mathnawī* which may have had the title *Yūsuf-u Zulaykhā*, “Joseph and Zulaykha,” as later versifications in Persian also carry this title.

The story of Joseph in Persian poetry

The most famous *Yūsuf-u Zulaykhā* in Persian is a *mathnawī* of over 4,000 verses, completed in 1483 by the poet ‘Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī (1414–1492), who lived and worked at the Timurid court in Herat. His *Yūsuf-u Zulaykhā* has a strong Sufi perspective, and it is in this framework that the figure of Zulaykha acquires a new dimension as an exemplary Sufi lover, showing the trajectory from self-centred love to selfless love, a major theme in Sufi poetry. Preceding Jāmī’s *Yūsuf-u Zulaykhā* by more than a century is the Judeo-Persian *Yūsuf-u Zulaykhā* written in 1358–1359 by Shāhīn Shīrāzī. Both his and Jāmī’s *Yūsuf-u Zulaykhā* are composed in the metre *hazaj*,³ in contrast to another well-known version of *Yūsuf-u Zulaykhā*, composed in the metre *mutaqārib* and ascribed to the poet Firdawsī. Firdawsī, who has a unique position in Persian literature as the author of the *Shāhnāma* or “Book of Kings” (also in the metre *mutaqārib*), became credited with composing a *Yūsuf-u Zulaykhā* only in the Timurid era. This is now generally considered a false attribution. The real author of this *Yūsuf-u Zulaykhā* in *mutaqārib*, of which the earliest manuscript dates from 1416, remains uncertain.

Earlier Persian versifications of the story of Joseph existed but are no longer extant: they are only attested in other sources, such as poetic biographies and books on prosody. Abū’l-Mu’ayyad Balkhī (10th century) seems to have been the first Persian poet who composed a *mathnawī* narrative poem on Joseph, which is referred to as *Yūsuf-u Zulaykhā*.⁴ One may speculate that the *mathnawī* fragment of *Yūsuf-u Zulaykhā* contained in Firuzkuh 81 perhaps represents the text of Abū’l-Mu’ayyad Balkhī’s lost poem. However, this is impossible to prove. Even though we have no clue who authored this fragment, it is thrilling to find in it strong supportive evidence that the *Yūsuf-u Zulaykhā* narrative poem indeed dates back to the 11th century.

Notes

1 Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm ibn Manṣūr Naysābūrī, *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’*, ed. H. Yagmā’ī (Tehran: Bungāh-i tarjuma-u nashr-i kitab, 1340/1961–1962), 90–91.

2 For readers interested in Persian metrics, here are some further details. The standard scheme of the *mujtathth* metre (*mujtathth-i muthamman-i makhbūn-i maḥdhūf*) is: 0 - 0 - / 0 0 - - / 0 - 0 - / 0 0 -, where “0” stands for a short syllable and “-” for a long one. In this scheme, a sequence of two short syllables (0 0) can be replaced by one long syllable (-). This

happens in many verses in Firuzkuh 81. For example, the scansion of verse 4a on verso is as follows: *bī raft yū suf giriyā n-u dī ga rān giriyān*, schematically 0 - 0 - / - - - / 0 - 0 - / - - .

3 More specifically, *hazaj-i musaddas-i maḥdhūf*.

4 Dh. Şafā, *Tārīkh-i adabiyāt dar Īrān* (Tehran: Ibn Sīnā, 1351/1972–1973), vol. 1, 403–405.

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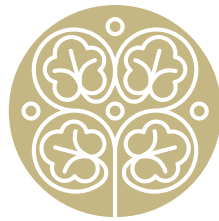
About the author

Gabrielle van den Berg is Senior University Lecturer in the Cultural History of Central Asia and Iran at the University of Leiden. Her research interests include Persian literature and the history of Iran and Central Asia; she has published in particular on the oral traditions of the Ismailis of Tajik Badakhshan and the *Shāhnāma* manuscript tradition.

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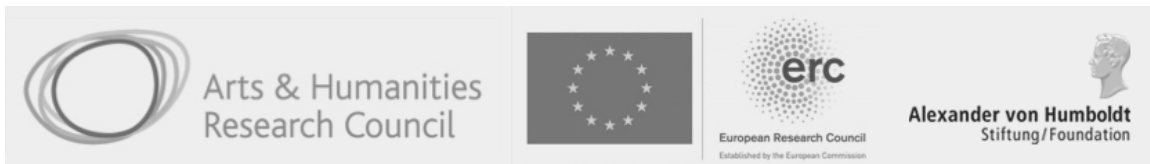
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