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Part One: Lived religion

Edited by Katharina Heyden

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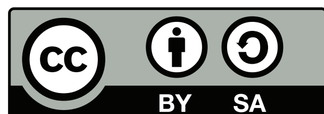

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Katharina Heyden and David Nirenberg

Weaving and Wearing Joseph Tunics in Early Islamic Egypt

An Interreligious Co-production of Text and Textile*

For Peter Brown,
who continually inspires our historical imagination

Abstract: This article explores the phenomenon of "Joseph tunics" – linen and wool garments adorned with scenes from the biblical and Qur'anic story of Joseph, which became popular in Egypt during the first three centuries of Islamic rule. It challenges traditional interpretations that assign these tunics to a single religious community (Coptic Christians) and proposes a framework of "religious co-production." This framework emphasizes the exchange and mutual shaping of narratives, material culture, social practices, and creation of meaning among Christians, Muslims and Jews, in early Islamic Egypt. The article delves into the textual and pictorial archives of Joseph stories across these faiths, highlighting the ways in which they were interwoven and adapted to address diverse theological and social needs. By examining the tunics as multilayered objects of religious co-production, the article offers a new lens through which to understand the complex interactions and cultural dynamics of this multi-religious society and discusses methodological challenges involved in studying objects from the past and historical interactions of religious cultures.

Keywords: religious co-production, Joseph, early Islamic Egypt, textiles, methodology

1. Introduction

Sometime during the first three centuries of Islamic rule in Egypt, linen and wool tunics decorated with colorful motifs from the story of Joseph became fashionable among wealthy urbanites. As told in chapters 37 – 50 of

* Our thanks to Janina Ammon, Adriana Basso Schaub, David Gyllenhaal, Benjamin Kamine, Michael Peter, Lea Schlenker, Sofía Torallas Tovar, Shlomo Zuckier, and the two anonymous readers of this journal for saving us from error, challenging interpretations, and pointing to additional sources.

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Genesis, that story is gripping. A gifted and dreamy child, favored by his father over his elder siblings, is nearly murdered by his jealous brothers only to be plucked from death and sold into slavery in Egypt. His owner's wife, angered because Joseph resists her erotic overtures, has him imprisoned on false charges of rape. Released after proving himself a skilled interpreter of dreams, he is promoted to a position of great power at Pharaoh's court, where his foresight saves the Egyptian people from a famine and reunites his own Israelite kin.

More than a hundred decorative applications of "Joseph tunics" are preserved in museums and collections all over the world. Even without a systematic catalogue of all surviving fragments,[1] we can reconstruct the arrangement of the ornamental applications and their pictorial program (figures 1, 2, and 5, 6). Round applications (*orbicula*) adorned the shoulder sections and the lower part of the tunic at about knee height, while rectangular or vertical stripes (*clavi*) decorated the neck opening and the chest. The ornaments were woven in counterparts and sewn onto the tunics so that each sequence of scenes appeared twice on the cloth: the tunics literally enveloped their wearers in the story of Joseph. This tailored tale of the successful immigrant who rose from slave and prisoner to the highest official in the imperial administration may have been worn to urban gatherings such as markets and festivals, and certainly to the grave. All surviving fragments were found in large cemeteries of rich cities in Middle Egypt, and all were produced – according to both stylistic and radiocarbon dating methods – between the second half of the seventh and the mid-tenth centuries CE.[2]

1 The most comprehensive discussion of the group is the unpublished dissertation of Laila Abdel-Malek, "Joseph Tapestries and Related Coptic Textiles" (unpublished PhD diss., University Microfilms International, 1980) covering 54 fragments; see also the list provided by Gary Vikan, "Joseph on Coptic Textiles," *Gesta* 18, no. 1 (1979): 105 – 7. A collection of 19 fragments was presented in 2008 in the Museum für Byzantinische Kunst Berlin, cf. Cäcilia Fluck, *Ein buntes Kleid für Joseph, Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst* (Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2008). Maya Müller, "Joseph's Temptation. Three New Scenes on a Coptic Textile at the Museum of Cultures in Basel," in *And the Earth is Joyous / и земля в ликовании. Essays in Honour of Galina A. Belova* (Moskau: Цей Ран, 2015), 243 – 45, provides the most recent and comprehensive analysis of not only the seduction scenes but Joseph tunics in general. While our study owes many insights to Müller's research, it aspires to expand the purview by attributing the tunics not to Coptic Christians exclusively (as Müller does, arguing that "it would be impossible for Jews or Muslims to have worn garments with Joseph pictures," 227), but interpreting them within the broader interreligious milieu of Egypt during the seventh to tenth centuries.

2 The dating of Joseph tunics to the early Islamic period (seventh to tenth century) is undebated among scholars for reasons of both pictorial style and weaving technique as

Figure 1: Tunic with applications from the Joseph cycle. Egypt, 670 – 880 CE. Clothing, tunic: linen 142x97 cm; knitwear: wool and linen, roundel 22,6x28,5 cm. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Byzantinische Kunst; Id. Nr. 9109/9110. Image: Antje Voigt, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Figure 2: Tunic made of undyed linen, 120x104 cm, with applied tapestry woven woollen decorations showing human figures, animals and birds (not the Joseph cycle!). Egypt, eighth to tenth century CE. This is one of the very few entirely preserved tunics of the early Islamic period, provided here to give an impression of the typical arrangement and size of applications. Victoria and Albert Museum London; Aquisition Number 136 – 1891 (https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O90760/tunic-unknown/), with courtesy.

well as radiocarbon investigation. There are few other textiles with scenes from the Joseph story that have been dated to the fourth–fifth centuries (e. g. three samit fragments in the treasury of the cathedral of Sens, inv. B 36, cf. Maximilien Durand and Florence Saragoza, *Égypte*, *la trame de l'Histoire. Textiles pharaoniques, coptes et islamiques* (Paris: Somogy Editions d'Art, 2002), 177, but all applications which belong to tunics have unanimously been dated to the seventh to tenth centuries. Abdel-Malek, *Joseph tapestries*, argued for the seventh century because of the ornamental style, others prefer a slightly later date. Carbon-14 investigation has been conducted for some fragments of Joseph tunics, cf. Antoine De Moor, eds., *Koptisch Textiel* (Zottegem: American Intercontinental University, 1993), 225 – 26, all pointing to a date between the late seventh and the tenth century. The radiocarbon dating of the best-preserved specimen of a Joseph tunic, kept in Berlin (figure 1), was conducted by Anne Kwaspen and Mathieu Bodin with KIK-IRPA in Brussels in 2021. It indicated a timeframe of between 670 and 880 with 95.4 % probability. (Our thanks to Cäcilia Fluck for this information.) For a more general though exemplary (re)assessment of traditional art historian dating methods through C^{14} dating methods of ancient textiles see Mark van Strydonck, Antoine De Moor and Dominique Bénazeth, "14C Dating Compared to Art Historical Dating of Roman and Coptic Textiles from Egypt," *Radiocarbon* 46, no. 1 (2004), and Mark van Strydonck and Dominique Bénazeth, "Four Coptic Textiles from the Louvre Collection 14C Redated after 55 Years," *Radiocarbon* 56, no. 1 (2014).

These dates coincide with the first centuries after Egypt fell under Islamic rule in the 640s, which suggests a question. Why did people in Egypt only start decorating their clothes with the story of Joseph after becoming a multi-religious society of Christians, Muslims, and (far fewer) Jews? To this question we might add many others. Who – Muslims? Christians? Jews? – wove these tunics, and who wore them? What did the tunics represent for the wearers, and how were they interpreted by those – Jews, Christians, Muslims – who made and saw them? In more general words: what can these tunics teach us about how individuals and communities of different faiths interacted with and thought about each other?

Anyone familiar with the nature of the surviving evidence knows that tempting though such questions might be, they cannot be answered with any certitude. The historical archive, both textual and textile, is too fragile and fragmentary to allow for the comprehensive reconstruction of an object's or text's creation, circulation, influence, intended meanings or interpretations. This is certainly true of Joseph tunics, which in no case reveal plainly the religion, let alone the intentions, of their weavers, their wearers, or their beholders. But this does not mean that we should not ask our questions, nor does it make objects like the Joseph tunics useless for the study of interreligious relations. To the contrary, the surviving shards of the historical archive offer an invitation to reflect upon the possibilities of interaction within, across, and between Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Those possibilities were many, because Jews, Muslims, and Christians had countless opportunities to shape and reshape their narrative traditions and their ways of life, their rituals and beliefs, their hopes and anxieties, by interacting with or even simply imagining each other. But just as the evidence for the vast majority of those interactions and imaginings has disappeared, so has our sense of the possibilities. Historical research must focus its interrogation on the fragmentary evidence that has reached us, but it should also be capable of attending to what does not survive. By building plausible imaginings upon the relatively few indications (seldom can we say proofs) of interactions between Christians, Muslims and Jews that have reached us, we can attempt to restore our sense of the myriad possibilities that may once have existed. This is what we seek to achieve here, by studying the Joseph tunics as multilayered objects of religious co-production.

Multilayered, because they demand that we consider not only the interrelation between people in a given moment of the past, but also between diverse genres of evidence with their own long and complex histories. In the case of Joseph tunics, for example, the surviving textile fragments need to

be situated not only in the moment of their production, but also within the broader history of weaving in ancient and medieval Egypt, and within long-entangled textual and visual traditions about Joseph in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.[3] In the case of both texts and textiles that task is daunting, and scholarly debates about origins, templates (*Vorlagen*), and directions of influence have pushed hard on the limits of methodology in history, art history, and philology.

We will push still harder by approaching the Joseph tunics as an example of "religious co-production," a term meant to capture the fact that these three religions, in all their sectarian variety, have always formed, reformed and transformed themselves by mutual engagement in life, thought, and imagination.[4] We will suggest that the example of the Joseph tunics is a rewarding one for this approach. Their production and meaning cannot be understood within any one religious community or tradition. They and their makers, wearers, and beholders must be situated within a frame of interpretation capable of encompassing multiple faith communities and genres of cultural production, including texts and images as well as lived interaction, and of generating diverse theologies and forms of individual and communal representation. We will first describe the textual archive of Joseph stories and suggest why it is better understood as co-produced, rather than in terms of individual religious traditions. We will then do the same with the pictorial archive, considering the surviving tunic decorations not only in relation to texts, but also to the multifaith contexts in which they circulated. Finally we will move to an even broader archive of sources that can stretch our imagination about what people might have felt and thought

3 The fact that all surviving fragments of Joseph tunics come from Egypt is due to the uniquely dry climate that allowed textiles to be preserved. This does not mean that similar clothing and similar motifs were not produced and worn elsewhere. Given the lack of evidence from other regions comparative claims are impossible. Nor, considering the fragmentary nature of even the Egyptian evidence, can we speak with any confidence about statistically representative samples. We will therefore limit ourselves to exploring what the tunics meant in the specific context of early Islamic Egypt, making no claims to either exclusivity or representativeness. For an instructive overview over the current state of the art in the study of Egyptian textiles see Antoine De Moor, Cäcilia Fluck and Petra Linscheid, eds., *Egypt as a textile hub. Textile Interrelationships in the 1st Millennium AD: Proceedings of the 10th Conference of the Research Group 'Textiles from the Nile Valley'* (Tielt: Lamno, 2019).

4 We have outlined the concept of religious co-production in the article Katharina Heyden and David Nirenberg, "Co-produced Religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam," *Harvard Theological Review* 118 (2025); see also the co-edited collective volume *Religious Coproduction in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Artefacts, Rituals, Communities, Narratives, Doctrines, Concepts*, ed. by Katharina Heyden and David Nirenberg (CORE 1) (Turnhout: Brepols, 2025), esp. the Introduction on pages 13 – 31.

when they wore or encountered Joseph jostling amongst Christians, Muslims, and Jews in the cities of early Islamic Egypt. Through the example of this one admittedly obscure piece of clothing, we hope to suggest some of the ways in which historians, philologists, art historians, and theologians can attend to untold potentials for religious interaction obliterated by the passage of time, while not imposing the fantasies of the present on the possibilities of the past.

2. Co-Producing the Textual Joseph

By the time Joseph tunics became fashionable in early Islamic Egypt, almost 1500 years of storytellers and scribes, audiences and readers of different faiths and communities had turned Joseph the dreamer, brother, and migrant into a common and sometimes contested figure of hope for a successful life in a foreign land. The tunics emerge within and contribute to that textual tradition, itself so confessionally inter-woven. Hence so we will begin with a brief survey of the archive of Joseph stories, focusing on those most probably accessible to the weavers and wearers of tunics in Early Islamic Egypt. Our goal is to suggest how, by the time Joseph's story was woven, it had been shaped by the interpretive work of generations of different religious communities into something each could recognize as their own.[5]

Joseph enters the scriptural stage in exilic times as "the first diaspora Jew."[6] In contrast to most of the biblical accounts of patriarchs, Gen 30.37 –

5 The Jewish Hellenistic texts of Jubilees 34 and Josephus, Antiquitates Iudaicae II, 9 – 200 (as written in Rome) are therefore not included here. On these, see Maren R. Niehoff, *The Figure of Joseph in Post-Biblical Jewish Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 84 – 110. We also do not focus on Rabbinic sources here, such as the fifth century *Genesis Rabbah*, but only bring them into play in a few relevant places. On Rabbinic interpretation of the Joseph story see Alan T. Levenson, *Joseph. Portraits through the Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Nebraska Press, 2016); on *Genesis Rabbah* see Niehoff, *The Figure of Joseph*, 111 – 41.

6 "Diaspora Jew" is obviously anachronistic, but apt in the sense that although traditionally the Joseph narrative has been dated to the time of Solomon or the Babylonian period (i. e. tenth to eighth century BCE), today most Hebrew Bible scholars consider the original narrative to be exilic. The current state of scholarship is represented in the collective volume: Thomas Römer, Konrad Schmid and Axel Bühler, *Joseph Story between Egypt and Israel* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021).While many chapters in this volume are concerned with diachronic redactional criticism, a synchronic reading of the biblical Joseph narrative was recently offered by Magnus Rabel, "Developing Joseph's Character: Narratological Reflections on the Dynamic Character of the Biblical Joseph," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 68 (2024); and Safwat Marzouk, "Migration in the Joseph Narrative: Integration, Separation, and Transnationalism," *Hebrew Studies* 60 (2019).

50 provides his story from birth to death in a tale with a clear narrative arc. The young Joseph's audacious aspirations and his father's favor provoke envy among his brothers. They plot against Joseph and throw him into a water pit or well, but then decide to offer him as a slave to a passing caravan of Ishmaelites, who take him to Egypt and sell him to one of the Pharaoh's chief officers. In that household Joseph succeeds in making a career for himself, until his master's wife attempts to seduce him and accuses him of attempted rape after he flees her overtures, resulting in his imprisonment. When Joseph's aptitude for dream interpretation is recognized in prison, he is summoned by the Pharaoh to interpret his troubling dreams. Impressed by Joseph, the Pharaoh appoints him minister, entrusting him with the oversight of the nation's agricultural and economic affairs, and bestowing upon him an Egyptian wife. Joseph successfully steers Egypt through a period of famine, during which he also welcomes his brothers and father. He passes away at the age of 110, the most influential figure in Egypt and progenitor of a substantial family.

Within the Torah this story serves as a bridge between the family tales of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in Genesis 12 – 36 and the exodus narration. It is in Egypt that the twelve sons of Jacob become progenitors of the twelve tribes that will form the people of Israel (cf. Exodus 1:6 f.). Embedded in the Deuteronomistic historical framework, the section of Genesis dedicated to Joseph functions as something of a pre-history to the Exodus story at the foundation of God's political history with the Israelites, with Joseph's ministerial power (and his people's subsequent slavery) serving as political precursors to Israelite sovereignty. Joseph plays a very minor role within the rest of the Hebrew Bible (he is mentioned in Psalms 81:6 and 105:16 – 23, and his bones are said to have been buried in the land of Israel by his descendants in Joshua 24:32). But despite this limited resonance in the Bible, Joseph came to play an important role for Jews residing in Egypt, providing a model and a point of projection for repeated retellings and reflections on issues of integration, acculturation and perseverance in a foreign land.

For Jewish writers such as Demetrius and Artapanus, living in Hellenistic Egypt and writing in Greek, Joseph exemplified the well-integrated and assimilated immigrant.[7] In Artapanus' account, Joseph comes to Egypt of his own free will, asking the neighboring Arabs to take him to Egypt to

7 See Carl R. Holladay, *Fragments from Hellenistic Jewish Authors* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), 51 – 8 (Demetrius) and 204 – 9 (Artapanus). Cf. Magnus Rabel, "Adapting and Adopting. The Biblical Joseph as Received by Artapanus, Demetrius and Philo the poet in third and second century BCE Egypt," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* (2025).

escape the jealousy of his brothers. Here, in his chosen home, Joseph becomes a minister celebrated by the people as the "Lord of Egypt." Similarly, Demetrius portrays Joseph as a fully integrated citizen and high official in order to highlight Joseph's respect for his adoptive Egyptian culture. In his account, Joseph does not send for his father and brothers when the famine begins, knowing that Egyptians consider shepherds a disgrace and would therefore not welcome them.

These texts by Jewish authors are a co-production, not with Christianity or Islam (neither of which yet existed), but with Greco-Egyptian culture. Their survival would be co-production too, for they are known only through excerpts of Alexander Polyhistor's *On the Jews* preserved in Eusebius's *Praeparatio evangelica*. That is, these Judeo-Egyptian texts reach us through a much later Christian writer quoting a 'pagan' author about the Jews, with the text put to different work at each stage.[8] The Christian Eusebius, for example, quotes Polyhistor to demonstrate the superiority of Jewish over Greek-Roman cultures, in "preparation" for his further claim (in the *Demonstratio evangelica*) that Christianity has in turn superseded Judaism.[9]

Joseph also provided much opportunity for reflection to Philo of Alexandria, the most prominent extant Jewish writer from Greco-Roman Egypt. In the book today called *On Joseph*, titled "a political life" in the manuscripts,[10] Joseph serves as the ideal of a Hebrew who maintains his cultural and religious distinctiveness even as he enters the highest circles of Egyptian society. Whereas in the biblical account Joseph refused the sexual advances of Potiphar's wife out of fidelity to his owner, who entrusted him with everything in his house except his wife (cf. Gen 39:8 – 9 LXX), Philo's Joseph offers the lascivious wife a lecture on the sexual ethics of the Hebrews.[11] His refusal of her efforts at seduction here stands for the rejection of Egyptian culture.[12] The confession Philo pens for Joseph, that he had at

8 We use the term "pagan" for lack of an alternative to express everything that is not Jewish nor Christian nor Islamic. ("Hellenistic" is in this sense too narrow.) We are aware that the word itself arises from Christian polemical use, and do not intend to imply the pejorative resonances intended in that usage.

9 Eusebius of Caesarea, Praeparatio evangelica 9.23.1 – 4. On the double work of Eusebius and its apologetic-missionary goals see Aaron P. Johnson, "Eusebius' *Evangelica* as Literary Experiment," in *Greek Literature in Late Antiquity: Dynamism, Didacticism, Classicism*, ed. Scott Fitzgerald Johanson (London: Routledge, 2006).

10 Thus the title in the manuscripts of Philo, De Iosepho: either *bios tou politikou* or *bios politikos*.

11 Philo, *De Iosepho* 42 – 44.

12 Cf. Pearce, *Studies in Philo's Representation of Egypt.*

times "departed from my accustomed manner of life and been drawn by the impulses of youth, and had been emulating the softness of this land"[13] serves to remind the reader that loyalty to Jewish law and resistance to acculturation are hard-won virtues that cannot be taken for granted. Just as Joseph "philosophized in this way till she ceased to importune him," so Jews must resist Egyptian culture by pursuing philosophy and studying the Scriptures so long and so intensively that the "softness of this land" of Egypt loses its seductive power.[14]

Elsewhere Philo wrote about Joseph to very different purpose. In his treatise on dreams (*De somniis*) Philo portrayed Joseph as decadent and opportunistic, so well adapted to Egyptian ways that, rather than Joseph forgiving his brothers after their arrival for their betrayal, it is they who forgive him for betraying his ancestral culture while in Egypt. *De somniis* in effect reverses the biblical narrative and stands in stark polarity to the exemplarity of *De Iosepho.*[15] Scholars have struggled to understand these contradictory portrayals of Joseph within the work of one author. Perhaps what unites them is Philo's lifelong concern with the relationship between Jewish and Egyptian-Roman culture.[16] Joseph embodies the challenges and promises of Jewish life in Egypt, including moments of both heroic resistance and seductiveness. In *On Joseph* loyalty to ancestral customs does not preclude a successful political life in Egypt, while *On Dreams* maintains the hope of forgiveness and return to one's ancestral heritage, even in the wake of assimilation into Egyptian culture.

A number of writings from the Greco-Roman period use Joseph to elaborate on questions of resistance and assimilation. In the *Testament of Joseph,* which reaches us in Greek, Aramaic (4Q539), and Armenian, Joseph on his deathbed recapitulates his life to his family. Two aspects dominate his recollections: the many and manifold attempts at seduction by his master's wife, and his elevation from slave to free man. His legacy of

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13 Philo, *De Iosepho* 44.

14 For this interpretation see Maren R. Niehoff, "New Garments for Biblical Joseph," in *Biblical Interpretation: History, Context, and Reality*, ed. Christine Helmer (Atlanta: SBL, 2005).

15 Philo, *De Somniis* 2:108. On the representation of Joseph in this work, see Sofía Torallas Tovar, "Philo of Alexandria's Dream Classification," *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 15 (2014): 75 – 78; for the difference between the two portrayals and possible explanations for it, see Sofía Torallas Tovar, "Introducción," in *Sobre los Sueños, Sobre José* (Madrid: Gredos, 1997), 29 – 40.

16 Cf. Jill Hicks-Keeton, *Arguing with Aseneth: Gentile Access to Israel's Living God in Jewish Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 29 – 35. For the broader picture we refer to Maren R. Niehoff, *Philo of Alexandria: An Intellectual Biography* (The Anchor Yale Library of References), (New Haven / London: Yale University Press, 2018).

virtues derives from these narratological strands, with his chastity becoming the symbol of his cultural integrity whose power defeats even the magic of the Egyptians. It is because of this perseverance that Joseph receives honor from his master and the people of the land, so that after his death "both Israel and Egypt mourned for him together."[17]

A text that reads almost like a counter-narrative to the *Testament of Joseph* proved even more popular. *Joseph and Aseneth* is a novel in Hellenistic style that takes as inspiration Joseph's marriage to the Egyptian Aseneth, the daughter of Pentephres the priest of Heliopolis (mentioned in Gen 41:45 LXX).[18] It is a tale about how a Hebrew's honorable intention of cultural segregation, broken by an Egyptian's attractive beauty, is transformed into a perfect love that itself reaffirms the rejection of Egyptian culture's dangerous attraction, offering Jewish readers an explanation of how an esteemed Hebrew patriarch could marry the daughter of an idolatrous Egyptian priest.[19] Both Joseph and Aseneth are characterized as extraordinarily beautiful, devoted to chastity, and adamantly against intercultural liaisons. It is not only Joseph who seeks to remain loyal to his people. When Aseneth's parents first propose the splendid Hebrew minister to her as a possible husband, she indignantly rejects him as an "alien and fugitive and sold man" (4:9). But upon seeing she is overwhelmed by Joseph's bright appearance and character, and assisted by an angel, converts to Joseph's "living God". Aseneth's transformation in turn earns Joseph's desire and love, culminating after many challenges (including the sexual advances of Pharaoh's son towards Aseneth, ch. 22 – 29) in their marriage with Pharao's blessing. In this telling, Egypt is a land in which

17 *Testament of Joseph* 20:5. On the *Testament of Joseph* see H. W. Hollaender, *Joseph as an Ethical Model in the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* (SVTP 6), (Leiden: Brill, 1981).

18 Scholarly literature on *Joseph and Aseneth* is abundant. To mention only a view titles that are specifically relevant for our discussion here: the collective volume *Joseph und Aseneth*, ed. Eckart Reinmuth (SAPERE X) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009); Angela Standarthinger, "Recent scholarship on Joseph and Aseneth (1988 – 2013)," *Currents in Biblical Research* 12, no. 3 (2014); Hicks-Keeton, *Arguing with Aseneth*; René Bloch, "Take Your Time: Conversion, Confidence and Tranquility in Joseph and Aseneth," in *Ancient Jewish Diaspora. Essays on Hellenism*, ed. Id., (Supplements to the Journal for Study of Judaism 206), (Leiden / Boston: Brill 2022); Patricia D. Ahearne-Kroll, *Aseneth of Egypt: The composition of a Jewish Narrative* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2020). For a brief introduction and overview see chapter 17 on *Joseph and Aseneth* in Daniel M. Gurtner, *Introducing the Pseudepigrapha of Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 304 – 18.

19 Though the Pentateuch did not explicitly forbid the intermarriage of Hebrews and Egyptians, the prohibition on intermarriage with Canaanites (Gen 24:3 – 4, 37 – 38; 27:46 – 28:1) may well have been extended to Egyptians by Jews writing in the late Hellenistic period.

God's people can live and even find spouses without betraying their ancestral tradition, so long as they show the strength of character of Joseph and Aseneth.

The tale circulated in many languages and versions, attested in dozens of manuscripts dating between the sixth and the seventeenth centuries.[20] The story clearly appealed to Christian readers, so much so that scholars have long debated its authorship – Jewish or Christian? – as well as the date and place of its composition. Jill Hicks-Keeton has called these debates "a tug of war in which Aseneth's religious affiliation has been pushed and pulled between Judaism and Christianity."[21] We might also situate the romance, as she does, in the context of debates taking place in the first two centuries of the common era over the possibility of gentile participation in Israel's salvation. These were pressing questions for early followers of Jesus (witness Paul's *Epistle to the Galatians*), but we need not assume that *Joseph and Aseneth* spoke only to Christian gentiles. It could just as well have offered hope to gentile converts to Judaism, presenting intermarriage as an opportunity for gentiles to participate *as* gentiles in Israel's covenant with the living God, provided they forsake their dead deities. Such a reading places *Joseph and Aseneth* betwixt and between Jewish, Jewish-Christian, gentile "pagan", gentile-Jewish, and gentile-Christian communities, used and perused in different ways by all of them, rather than attempt to affix to it the unitary label of "Jewish" or "Christian".[22]

Many of the Joseph texts reach us as an accretion of redactions and retellings in manuscripts so numerous, varied, and complex that it is often a challenge to distinguish clearly between the various works or their versions, or to assign their authorship to any one faith community. We have works transmitted in many ancient languages – Greek, Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, Arabic, Latin, Slavonic – and modern ones as well, bearing a shifting variety of titles, such as *Legenda Joseph, Historia Joseph,*

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20 A list of all Greek, Syriac, Armenian, Latin, Slavonic, and Ethiopic manuscripts known today is provided in Christoph Burchard, *Joseph und Aseneth. Kritisch herausgegeben von Christoph Burchard mit Unterstützung von Carsten Burfein und Uta Barbara Fink* (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2003), 2 – 68. See also Uta Barbara Fink, "Textkritische Situation," in *Joseph und Aseneth,* ed. Eckhart Reinmuth (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 33 – 53.

21 Hicks-Keeton, *Arguing with Aseneth*, 26.

22 This also applies to the most recent suggestion of Anthony Sheppard, "Aseneth: A Tale from the Religious Frontier," *Journal for the Study of Pseudepigrapha* 32 (2022), to place JosAs at the borderlines between Rabbinic Judaism and Gnostic Christianity in second / third century Egypt. This must remain speculation, not least because it introduces yet another unknown into the discussion in the form of "gnosis".

Narratio Joseph, Vita Joseph, Oratio Joseph.[23] In many cases, attempts to produce a critical edition of a work or to clearly identify different redactions founder on the fact that each manuscript tells a slightly different story, intermingling elements from different sources and creating ever new variations of Joseph's life. For some works, such as *Joseph and Aseneth*, critical editions have been produced, only to be in turn much criticized.[24] For others the tradition is so varied that an effort to produce a standard text is obviously futile.

This is the case with two works that we know from Coptic textual witnesses existed in Egypt. The first, often found bound side by side with *Joseph and Aseneth* in manuscripts but even more widespread and difficult to separate from the tangle of Joseph writings into a stable and bounded text, is a homiletic version of the Joseph story known as *On the beautiful Joseph.* In Greek alone there are more than 140 extant manuscripts.[25] Many of these attribute the work to the fourth century Syriac author Ephraem, but since no Syriac version has survived, scholars attribute it to a "Greek Ephraem".[26] Armenian, Georgian, Arabic, Slavonic and Latin versions attest to its global and ecumenical popularity. In Armenia it was included in many Bible codices, enjoying a quasi-canonical status. It reached the Latin West as well, serving a Carolingian preacher as source for a sermon on Jacob and Joseph.[27] A Greek papyrus from sixth or seventh century Egypt and two Coptic manuscripts point to *The beautiful Joseph*'s presence in early Islamic Egypt.[28]

The narrative of the homily focuses on the first part of the biblical story, Joseph's journey to Egypt and the seduction scene in the house of his master (cf. Gen 37.39 – 40). Its presentation of the brothers' arrival in Egypt, on the

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23 Many of the works are mentioned and briefly discussed in Angela Standarthinger, "Recent research on the so-called 'Life of Joseph' also known as 'In pulcherrimum Ioseph'," *Journal for the Study of Pseudepigrapha* 33 (2024). On the *Historia Joseph* see also Joseph Verheyden, "A Jewish King in Egypt? A Note on the so-called *History of Joseph*," in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha and the Scriptures* (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 270), ed. Eibert Tigchelaar (Leuven: Peeters, 2014).

24 See Burchard, *Joseph und Aseneth* and the critical evaluation of Hicks-Keeton, *Arguing with Aseneth.*

25 All 142 known manuscripts are available here: https://portail.biblissima.fr/fr/ark:/43093/oedatad24ae30a7e9bc6095b335dff4b2105ad4d23dfc5 (05. 11. 2025).

26 On the homilies of the Greek Ephraem see Trevor Fiske Crowell, "The Biblical Homilies of Ephraem Graecus" (unpublished PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 2016).

27 Codex Latinus Monacensis Clm 3516, fol. 109v–117v. Cf. Standarthinger, *Life of Joseph*, 294 – 97.

28 The Greek papyrus is Papyrus Montfaucon TM 59725 / LDAB 829. Eric Crégheur and Paul-Hubert Poirier, *La Version Copte discours pseudo-éphrémien 'In pulcherrimum Ioseph'* (CSCO 54), (Leuven: Peeters, 2020).

other hand, is much briefer than the Bible's (cf. Gen 41 – 46). One stylistic attribute of the work is its use of ornate discourse to articulate the emotions of the protagonists, for example in Jacob's long lament for Joseph and in the seduction scene with Potiphar's wife, this last meticulously elaborated with attention to detail. Also notable is the homily's disinterest in differentiating between Joseph's brothers, treating them as a unified block, in contrast with many other retellings of the story that seek to assign to them different roles (casting Reuben, for example, in more favorable light). But the most obvious peculiarity comes in the work's first 120 lines. These introduce Joseph as a figure for Christ and his brothers as representatives of the Jews, thereby placing the entire work under the sign of typology. The power of that typology – Joseph as Jesus, the brothers his Jewish would-be murderers – suffices to explain the other peculiarities we've noted.[29] This too is a form of co-production, in which a Christian re-narration of the Joseph story finds new Christological and anti-Jewish meaning in the history of prophecy, meaning that will itself shape how the inhabitants of the Christian empire in which the work was produced could think about and act toward the Jews living amongst them.

The last Hellenistic version we will mention comes from the dustier shelves of the Joseph archive, but deserves attention because of its Coptic transmission in Egypt, and its connection to both Talmud and Qur'an. The work has recently been returned to scholarly attention by Anders Klostergaard Peterson, with the title *Narratio Ioseph* and the argument that it originated in Second Temple Judaism rather than in Christian late antique monasticism, as previous scholars had assumed.[30] We need not enter these debates about origins and influences, in order to ask what this variation on Joseph might have contributed to the image of Joseph in late antique and early medieval Egypt.

29 Typological interpretation of the Joseph figure was specifically prominent in Syriac Christianity, see Kristian S. Heal, *Genesis 37 and 39 in the Early Syriac Tradition* (Monographs of the Peshitta Institute Amsterdam 20), (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2023); id., "The Syriac History of Joseph. A new translation and introduction," in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: More Noncanonical Scriptures. Vol. 1*, ed. Richard Bauckham, James Davila and Alex Panayotov (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013); Robert A. Phenix, *The Sermons on Joseph of Balai of Qenneshrin. Rhetoric and Interpretation in Fifth Century Syriac Literature* (STAC 50), (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008).

30 Anders Klostergaard Petersen, "Narratio Ioseph: A Rarely Acknowledged Coptic Joseph Apocryphon," in *The Embroidered Bible: Studies in Biblical Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha in Honour of Michael E. Stone*, ed. Lorenzo DiTommaso, Matthias Henze and William Adler (Leiden: Brill, 2018); see already Jan Dochhorn and Anders Klostergaard Petersen, "Narratio Ioseph: A Coptic Ioseph-Apocryphon," *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 30, no. 4 (1999).

Only fragments of the work survive, but these focus their narration on Gen 37, the same part of the story depicted on most of the surviving fragments of the Joseph tunics. Two details stand out. The first is a marked effort to differentiate among the brothers in terms of their relationship to Joseph. Judah and Reuben are cast positively, while Gad is assigned a particularly hostile attitude towards Joseph, repeated trying to kill him by throwing stones that miraculously fail to wound their target (17:5 – 20). The second is the introduction of the devil as an additional actor in the scene. In the guise of an old man the devil offers to lead Joseph to his brothers, but Joseph recognizes his true identity and rebukes him. Humiliated, the vengeful devil incites the brothers to conspire murderously against Joseph, despite the opposition of Judah and Reuben.

Both elements are already present in the biblical narrative, but the brothers' disagreement is clearly emphasized here, and the "old man" of Genesis 37:15 is reinterpreted as the devil.[31]

The *Narratio Ioseph*'s interest in brotherly conflict contrasts sharply with what we saw in *The Beautiful Ioseph,* where all the brothers are presented as a negative group in keeping with their typological interpretation as the Jewish killers of Jesus. In this sense it is more similar to Hellenistic and Rabbinic Jewish sources like *Joseph and Aseneth* and *Genesis Rabbah*, which also attribute different moral qualities to the siblings.[32] In its introduction of the devil, however, the *Narratio Ioseph* is distinct from the archive of texts we have discussed so far. In all other variants, Joseph's guide either remains anonymous or is revealed to be an angel.[33] None present the guide as the embodiment of the devil. None that is, until the Qur'anic retelling of the Joseph story in Surah 12, Yusuf, where the devil again becomes the broker in conflict between brothers.

The Qur'an also forms part of the Joseph archive, and it too would have been available in mid-eighth-century Egypt.[34] Sura 12 Yusuf, which proclaims itself "the most beautiful of all stories" (v. 3), holds a particular place

31 Other texts and textiles interpret the man as an angel instead, as for example the samite fragment of Sens mentioned by Durand and Saragoza, *Égypte*, 214 cat. 177.

32 Gad's hatred of Joseph is also told in *Joseph and Aseneth* 24 – 28.

33 Philo and Josephus retain the guide's anonymity, while Genesis Rabbah 4:18, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and the Ethiopic tradition presents him as an angel, see Klostergaard Petersen, *Narratio Ioseph*, 817 – 18.

34 See Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Study* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022), 43 – 69; Nicolai Sinai, "The Christian Elephant in the Meccan Room: Dye, Tesei and Shoemaker on the Date of the Qurʾān," *Journal of the International Quranic Studies Association* 9, no. 1 (2024).

within the Qur'an as a rare narratological retelling of biblical material.[35] The Sura is artfully structured, interweaving various leitmotifs. The initial and concluding verses 1 – 2, and 102 – 111, provide a hermeneutical framework, calling attention to signs (*āyāt*) inherent in the story. The narrative framework is provided by Joseph's dream. In verse 4 f., he tells his father his vision or dream *(ru'yā),* with eleven stars, the sun and the moon prostrating before him; and in verse 100 he declares: "This is the fulfilment of my vision." Satan provides a throughline in the story. He enters the scene in the father's response to Joseph's vision, as the "manifest enemy of all mankind" (v. 5), then reappears to cause a fellow prisoner to forget about Joseph (v. 42) and is finally recalled in Joseph's concluding remark that it was Satan who incited evil between him and his brothers (v. 100). The political core of the narrative is repeated in the declaration "Thus did we establish Joseph in the land" (*wa kadhālika makkannā li-Yūsufa fil-arḍi*) which occurs at verses 21 and 56.[36]

sign – (*āyah)*	v.1 – 3
vision – *(raā, ru'yā)*	v.4 f.
Satan – *(ash-Shayṭāna)*	v.5
"thus did we establish Joseph in the land"	v.21
Satan – (*ash-Shayṭāna)*	v.42
vision – *(ru'yā)*	v.43
"thus did we establish Joseph in the land"	v.56
Satan – *(ash-Shayṭāna)*	v.100
vision – *(ru'yā)* fulfillment	v.100 f.
sign – (*āyah)*	v.102 – 111

35 For a literary analysis of Sura 12 see Joseph Witztum, "The Syriac Milieu of the Quran: The Recasting of Biblical Narrative" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2011), 188 – 256; Charbel Rizk, "The Joseph Story in the Qur'ān and in the Syriac Tradition: Qur'ānic Prophetology as a Counter-Discourse to Christocentric Typology," in Syriac Theology: Past and Present (Beiträge zur Komparativen Theologie 36), ed. Martina Aras, Charbel Rizk and Klaus von Stosch (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2022); Ayaz Afsar, "Plot Motifs in Joseph / Yusuf Story: A Comparative Study of Biblical and Qur'ānic Narrative," *Islamic Studies* 45, no. 2 (2006); Mustansir Mir, "The Qur'ānic story of Joseph: Plot, Themes, And Characters," *The Muslim World* 76, no. 1 (1986); Jaako Hämeen-Anttila, "We Will Tell you the Best of Stories: A Study on Surah XII," *Studia Orientalia* 67 (2015).

36 Michel Cuypers, "Semitic Rhetoric as a Key to the Question of the naẓm of the Qur'anic Text," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 13 (2011): 15 – 19, includes Sūrat Yūsuf as a representative example of Qur'anic rhetorical structure. His reconstruction is different than ours, in part because the core that interests him is prophetic (Joseph as proclaimer of monotheism at verses 38 – 40) rather than political. On the Ring-Composition see Jawad Anwar Qureshi, "Ring Composition in Surat Yusuf (Q 12)," *Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association* 2 (2017).

This carefully crafted story exists in relation to other texts in the archive. With Philo and the *Testament of Joseph*, it shares the embellishment of the seduction attempts by the Egyptian woman, with the difference that in the Qur'an the attraction is mutual, and Yusuf would have inclined toward her "had he not seen the proof of his Lord" (v. 24). Midrash Genesis Rabbah 87:7 and other Rabbinic sources share this theme of mutual desire, with Joseph losing his nerve when he sees a sign from God (the image of his father), perhaps indicating a Jewish-Qur'anic co-production of this motif.[37] Like *On the beautiful Joseph*, the Sura shows no interest in distinguishing between the brothers, who appear throughout as an anonymous group. But unlike that Christian typological sermon, the Sura's introduction of Satan as an actor in the background – an element shared only by the Qur'an and the Coptic *Narratio Joseph* – suggests that the story plays out between God and Satan. The brothers (and other human protagonists) are in some sense absolved of their guilt.

The Qur'anic narrative can even be understood as a counter-discourse both to the Genesis account, in which Joseph is a patriarch, visionary, and skilled politician but not a prophet of monotheism, and the Christian typological interpretation of Joseph as Jesus. The concluding verses of the Sura (102 – 111) make clear that Joseph's story and teachings confirm those of the Qur'an's Prophet, and testify to that prophet's truth and eventual triumph over all opponents. Here we have yet another co-production, in which different Christian and Jewish variants of the Joseph archive help shape a distinctively authoritative Islamic form, which will in turn exercise a powerful influence on the future development of traditions about Joseph in Judaism and Christianity.

In pointing out commonalities and differences between texts in the Joseph archive as it might have been available in the Egypt of the tunics, we are not suggesting direct influences or intertextual references, nor are we claiming to trace developments from one text to another. The goal of our synopsis of textual traditions is to make visible some of the many narrative parallels and differences within it, and to suggest that all of these were potentially available to those who wove or wore Joseph tunics, and to those who beheld them. Already inter-related stories provided potential points of resonance and interpretation for members of the varied faith traditions of Egypt in the seventh to tenth centuries, whether Christian, Muslim, or Jew.

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37 Cf. James L. Kugel, "Joseph's Change of Heart," in *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1990), 94 – 124, especially 106 – 8. Kugel does not, however, mention the Qur'an. We thank Benjamin Kamine for this reference.

This co-produced textual archive permits us to glimpse diverse communities adapting an ancient story and influencing each other's interpretations in the process, picking apart the narrative fabric and reweaving some of its threads as they sought to tailor it to their own needs. Sometimes those needs were quite exclusive, as when Philo used Joseph to interrogate the proper boundary between Jews and Egyptians, or in the typological reading of Joseph as Jesus and his brothers as murderous Jews, or in the Qur'an's presentation of Joseph as confirmation of Muhammad. But those needs and interests could also be common. Joseph offered believers of all three faiths an example of virtuous beauty, of hope even in deepest despair, and of the highs and lows of life in family, household, and court. Whether exclusive or common, the responses to the needs were not formulated or received in isolation from other traditions.

Is it too obvious to state that textiles are themselves another interest shared by all these texts and the communities that produced them? Clothing and its signifying power, its ability to communicate meaning as well as to deceive, are a leitmotif in the textual archive of Joseph. In the biblical account, the colorful coat (gr. *chitōn*) is a symbol of Jacob's preferential love for Joseph (Gen 37:3), while also providing (falsified) testimony to the brothers' story that he was killed by an animal (Gen 37:31–33). Once in Egypt, Joseph's clothes (gr. *himatia)* play a significant role in his trial for the alleged rape of Potiphar's wife (39:12–18), as well as in signifying his elevation at court (41:14.42: *stolē*).[38] *Joseph and Aseneth* not only delights in detailed descriptions and interpretations of Joseph's clothes, but also uses Aseneth's garments to symbolize her religious transformation.[39] *On the beautiful Joseph* takes the blood-stained garment as inspiration for Jacob's long and bitter lament for his beloved Joseph. In the Qur'an, Yusuf's shirt (arab. *qamīṣ*) runs through the entire narration, repeatedly disclosing truth and exposing deceit or disguise (v. 18, 26, 27, 30,

38 See Franz Volker Greifenhagen, "The qamīṣ in Sūrat Yūsuf: A Prolegomenon to the Material Culture of Garments in the Formative Islamic Period," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 11 (2009); John R. Huddlestun, "Divestiture, Deception, and Demotion: The Garment Motif in Genesis 37–9," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 98 (2002); Victor H. Matthews, "The Anthropology of Clothing in the Joseph Narrative," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 65 (1995).

39 Meredith Warren, "A Robe like Lightning. Clothing Changes and Identification in 'Joseph and Aseneth'," in *Dressing Judeans and Christians in Antiquity*, ed. Kristi Upson-Saia, Carly Daniel-Hughes and Alicia J. Batten (London: Routledge, 2014).

32, 51, 94).[40] It even restores sight to the elderly Jacob, curing him of his blindness through powers that approach the miraculous (12:93). Those powers would continue to be developed within Islam. According to later traditions, the shirt had been woven from the silk of paradise and given by Gabriel as protection to Abraham, whom it saved from death. Abraham bequeathed it to Isaac, and Isaac to Jacob, who tied it around the infant Joseph's neck as an amulet. When Joseph was thrown into the well Gabriel appeared once more, opened the amulet, and clothed the boy in the protective garment.[41]

The garment's many meanings in the textual archive help us imagine how the textile objects might have been interpreted by their wearers and beholders. It is not just the obvious fact that whenever anyone familiar with any strand of the textual tradition encountered the textile story in the streets, they could draw on their knowledge of the tradition to interpret the textile. It is also that texts and textiles informed each other. For example, the Islamic tradition of Joseph's shirt may have encouraged Muslims and their Christian and Jewish neighbors to attribute amuletic powers to Joseph tunics when they donned them or encountered a wearer.[42] Conversely, diverse ideas and practices concerning amuletic, magical, and miraculous

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40 Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to the Veiled Text* (London: SCM Press, 1996), 149; and the detailed analysis of the garment motif in Greifenhagen, *The qamīṣ in Sūrat Yūsuf*, 74 – 76.

41 See Shari Lowin, "The Cloak of Joseph: A Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ Image in an Arabic and a Hebrew Poem of Desire", *Mizan: Journal for the Study of Muslim Societies and Civilizations* 2, no. 1 (2017): 9 – 10, citing traditions transmitted by Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Thaʿlabī (d. 427/1035), *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ al-musammā ʿArā'is al-majālis*, 113; Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Kisāʾī (ca. fifth / eleventh century), *Vita Prophetarum auctore Muhammad ben Abdallah al-Kisa'i*, 158 – 59 and Ibn Muṭarrif al-Ṭarafī (d. 453 – 54/1062), *The Stories of the Prophets by Ibn Muṭarrif al-Ṭarafī*, 99, no. 265 and 121 – 122, no. 319. Similar traditions were transmitted by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, vol. 18, 427 – 28; Aḥmad ibn Abī Ṭālib al-Ṭabarsī (d. 548/1153 – 54), *Majmaʿ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, vol. 5, 289, and others. A pre-Qur'anic Rabbinic version of the coat being woven for Adam from the silk of paradise is provided by Genesis Rabbah 97:6: Jacob bequeaths to Joseph the coat, which he had won from Esau as part of the inheritance. We owe this reference to Benjamin Kamine.

42 For amuletic power attributed to textiles in Byzantine Egypt see the chapter: "Cultural values in Clothing: Apotropaic Practices," in: Faith Pennick Morgan, *Dress and Personal Appearance in Late Antqituity. The Clothing of the Middle and Lower Classes* (Late Antique Archeology. Supplementary Series 1), (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2018), 39 – 64, esp. 44; Henry Maguire, "Garments Pleasing to God. The Significance of Domestic Textile Designs in the Early Byzantine Period," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 44 (1990): 223; cf. Laura Rodríguez Peinado, Ana Cabrera Lafuente, Enrique Parra Crego and Luis Turell Coll, "Discovering Late Antique Textiles in the Public Collections in Spain: an Interdisciplinary Research Project," *Greek and Roman Textiles and Dress* (2014).

vestments in the late ancient world may have encouraged the development of such interpretations about Joseph's garment in the textual tradition.[43]

To put it more generally: the textile in the text and the text in the textile should also be understood as a co-production, for the meanings that could be found in the one were not independent of the other. How people thought about the verses of their traditions affected how they thought about their vestments, and vice-versa.[44]

Perhaps the most vivid example of this co-dependence comes from an early sixth century illuminated Greek manuscript today called the Vienna Genesis, which contains an extensive program of illuminations of the Joseph story.[45] Because this is one of the rare surviving late antique Genesis manuscripts illustrating the Joseph narrative (another is the Cotton Genesis, thought to have been illuminated in Alexandria or Antinoë in the fifth century), scholars have studied it as a possible *Vorlage* (precursor template) for the Joseph tunics, comparing its visual program to that of other objects in the pictorial archive that we are about to enter, in an effort to trace the origins of our tunics' repertoire of visual motifs.[46] In several of the Vienna Genesis' illuminations, Joseph is differentiated by his tunic from the other characters in the scene (figures 3 and 4).

This is not surprising: after all, the distinctiveness of Jacob's gift to Joseph plays a central role in the story. But what is remarkable (and has not been noted) is the striking resemblance of the Vienna Genesis tunic to the

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43 See for example Jennifer L. Ball, "Charms: Protective and Auspicious Motifs," in *Designing Identity: The Power of Textiles in Late Antiquity*, ed. Thelma K. Thomas (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

44 Our proposal here is less uni-directional (that is, more co-productive) than Roland Barthes' *Système de la mode* (The Fashion System, 1967), in which the literary code precedes the vestimentary, and text precedes social experience. For a very suggestive Barthesian interpretation of the Qur'anic material, see Greifenhagen, *The qamīṣ in Sūrat Yūsuf.*

45 Österreichische Nationalbibliothek Codex Theol. gr. 31, cf. Barbara Zimmermann, *Die Wiener Genesis im Rahmen der antiken Buchmalerei. Ikonographie, Darstellung, Illustrationsverfahren und Aussageintention* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2003); Christa Hofmann, ed., *The Vienna Genesis. Material analysis and conservation of a Late Antique illuminated manuscript on purple parchment* (Wiesbaden: Böhlau Verlag, 2020).

46 See Ernst Kitzinger, "The Story of Joseph on a Coptic Tapestry," *Journal of the Warburg Institute* 1 (1938); Otto Pächt, "Ephraimilliustration, Haggadah und Wiener Genesis," in *Festschrift Karl M. Swoboda zum 28. Januar 1959* (Wien / Wiesbaden: Rudolf M. Rohrer Verlag, 1959); Vikan, *Joseph Iconography*, 100 – 5; Claudia Nauerth, "Bemerkungen zum koptischen Josef," *Rivista degli studi orientali* 58 (1984): 136 – 37; Abdel-Malek, *Joseph Tapestries*, 88 – 100; Cäcilia Fluck, "Vestimenta Josephi Berolinensia. Gedanken zur Josephsgeschichte auf Wirkereien des Museums für Byzantinische Kunst in Berlin," in *Realia Coptica, Festgabe zum 60. Geburtstag von Hermann Harrauer*, ed. Ulrike Horak (Vienna: Holzhausen, 2001), 30 – 31; Müller, *Joseph's Temptation*, 243 – 45.

Figure 3: Vienna Genesis, parchment, sixth century CE. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. Theol. Graec. 31, fol. 29. The register above shows Joseph dreaming and reporting the dreams to his parents and brothers; the register below depicts the brothers plotting against Joseph. https://viewer.onb.ac.at/106F8E6A

ones we have been discussing, with *orbiculi* on the shoulders and *clavi* along the neck opening. [cf. figures 1, 2 and 5, 6] This early sixth century text depicts Joseph as wearing a luxury garment of contemporary Egyptians, more than a century before the appearance of Joseph tunics themselves.

Figure 4: Vienna Genesis, parchment, sixth century CE. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. Theol. Graec. 31, fol. 31. Register above: seduction scene, register below: Egyptian women. https://viewer.onb.ac.at/106F8E6A. Folios 35 and 36 of the same codex represent Joseph acting in his role as minister, again wearing a decorated tunic.

Alas, the pictorial program on Joseph's tunic is not rendered. We cannot know if the manuscript's illuminators imagined Joseph's decorated with scenes from the age of Hellenistic gods and heroes, like other tunics before the Islamic conquests, or with something else. But we do know that a century or two later, Egyptians would fashion for themselves the same style

of tunics, this time decorated with the life of Joseph. Manuscript tradition and worn experience here influence each other in ways that are not unidirectional.

3. The Joseph Textiles in Their Multireligious Context

It is from this multi-layered and multi-religious textual vantage point that we can now return to the tunics themselves, to imagine what meanings they might have generated in their movement from loom to markets and festivals to tomb. We cannot assume that those meanings were discretely confessional. Like texts, and perhaps even more so than texts – for which we can at least sometimes identify authors, their religious self-attributions and intentions in writing – objects of material culture like these tunics raise fundamental questions about classification.

What makes an artifact, a piece of clothing in our case, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, or "pagan"? Is it the faith-community of the maker? In the case of the tunics that is impossible to determine. Although we call textiles produced in Christian Late Antique Egypt "Coptic", we should not assume that textile production after the Islamic conquest remained exclusively in the hands of Coptic Christians.[47] Even if it did, it would still be misleading to label such textiles "Christian", since they were now being woven within a multi-faith market, appealing to the fashions of a Muslim, Christian, and even Jewish urban world.

47 Scholars have assumed that the Copts were responsible for textile production – and conversely concluded that the decline in textile production since Fatimid times also meant a decline in Coptic culture; cf. Annette Stauffer, *Spätantike und koptische Wirkereien. Untersuchungen zur ikonographischen Tradition in spätantiken und frühmittelalterlichen Textilwerkstätten* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1992); Müller, *Joseph's Temptation*, 242 f.; Horak, *Realia Coptica*; Thelma K. Thomas, "Coptic and Byzantine textiles found in Egypt: Corpora, collections, and scholarly perspectives," in *Egypt in the Byzantine World, 300–700,* ed. Roger S. Bagnall (Cambridge: CUP, 2007); Barbara Weber-Dellacroce, *Gewebte Kostbarkeiten. Koptische Textilien im Stadtmuseum Simeonstift* (Museumssammlung im Blickpunkt 4), (Trier: Stadt Trier Stadtmuseum Simeonstift, 2016); R. Shurinova, *Coptic Textiles. Collection of Coptic Textiles. State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts Moscow. Introduction and Catalogue* (Leningrad: Avrova 1967), pl. 98, nr. 186; Claudia Nauerth, "Die Josefgeschichte auf koptischen Stoffen," *Enchoria. Zeitschrift für Demotistik und Koptologie* 8 (1978); Nauerth, *Bemerkungen.* The Metropolitan Museum's description of a Joseph roundel asserts that it "utilizes explicitly Christian imagery" and that "textiles like this one are thought to have been produced by Copts (Christian Egyptians)", see https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/451718 (09.03.2026).

Or is it the pictorial program that determines classification? The Joseph tunics have no specifically Christian (or Muslim, or Jewish) mark or symbol in their pictorial program. Rather, they visualize the story of a figure who, as we have seen, had become meaningful in many and varied Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions. Should we instead stress the religious affiliation of associated individuals to classify the material object? We are seldom able to relate a given object to a specific person with a known religious 'identity.' But even if we were, who should the relevant person be? It is not the customer, the designer, the producer, the wearer, the viewer, or even a figure in the image itself that makes a garment Muslim, Christian, Jewish, or "pagan." All of these participate together in the aesthetic perception and meaning-production of an object.

Clearly the pictorial decoration of late antique Egyptian textiles does not immediately reveal the religious identity of their makers or wearers. Dionysian and other Hellenistic mythological motifs predominated throughout the Roman and Byzantine periods, even during centuries of clear Christian dominance among the population, but we should not conclude from this that the wearers were non-Christian, or that Christians worshipped Dionysus. The surviving evidence suggests that mythological heroes, especially Hercules and Achilles, were the most popular motifs in the textiles of predominantly Christian Byzantine Egypt. Christians before the arrival of Islam liked to adorn themselves with heroes who did not necessarily come from their "own" prophetic traditions, even when (especially when?) these were expensive luxuries, as was the case with decorated tunics.

But it also seems clear that the pictorial program of predominantly Christian Egypt changed after the Muslim conquest. Heroic figures were replaced. But they were not immediately substituted by nonfigurative representations, as one might expect given the iconoclasm often associated with Islam. Rather, Achilles and Hercules were replaced by Joseph, a hero familiar to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. In other words, the very presence of Joseph on Egyptian textiles is already a religious co-production, one interpretable by any viewer in terms of their own tradition. Joseph tunics present a pictorial program that a Jewish or Christian viewer could understand as consonant with the Joseph narrative in Genesis. A Muslim could equally well have understood them as entirely in keeping with the account in the Qur'an. We do not find details in the textiles that would allow us to proclaim with certainty the specific influence of any of the other Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions swirling around Joseph we surveyed above, though viewers could certainly have brought those traditions

to bear in their interpretations. In short, the visual particulars of Joseph's woven presence in Egypt do not reveal to the historian whose version of Joseph had triumphed, any more than they reveal to us the religious "identity" of weaver or wearer. What they can illuminate is the dynamic process of meaning-making within and across these three religions that we are calling co-production.

This is not the path the art-historical literature has trodden. Even more than philological scholarship on texts, art history has addressed the iconography of the tunics entirely within one faith tradition: the Christian.[48] Over more than a century, scholars have assembled an archive of Joseph imagery across multiple media identified as Christian-illuminated manuscripts, Egyptian textiles, carved ivory furniture, the mosaics of late antique and medieval churches – and worked to discern the textiles' place in the development and transmission of a tradition of iconography that is not only remarkably widespread, but also remarkably stable. The thirteenth century mosaic scenes of Joseph's life in the Venetian church of San Marco, for example, bear a strong formal resemblance in both format and iconography to the tunic decorations worn in early Islamic Egypt five hundred years before.[49] And both share repertoires of scenes and visual vocabulary with pictorial programs in even earlier illuminated manuscripts, such as the Cotton and Vienna Genesis, as well as with non-biblical works we en-

48 Few scholars have occasionally wondered about possible narrative influences from Judaism, asking, for example, whether the sequence of scenes in the orbiculi might owe something to Philo's version of the Joseph story rather than the Septuagint's (see Pächt, *Ephraimillustrationen*; Otto Pächt and Jeanne, "An Unknown Cycle of Illustrations of the Life of Joseph," *Cahiers Archeologique* 7 (1954); Gary Vikan, "Illustrated Manuscripts of Pseudo-Ephraem's Life of Joseph and the Romance of Joseph and Aseneth" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1976); Joseph Gutmann, "Joseph Legends in the Vienna Genesis," *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies* (1969)), or whether the Vienna and the Cotton Genesis might not show traces of Rabbinic interpretations in its illuminations (see the discussion between Katrin Kogman-Appel, "Bible Illustration and the Jewish Tradition," in *Imaging the Early Medieval Bible*, ed. John Williams (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press 1999), and Barbara Zimmermann, "Außerbiblische Bildelemente in Alttestamentlichen Darstellungen. Bemerkungen zur Methode ihrer Interpretation anhand der Miniaturen der Wiener Genesis," *Römische Historische Mitteilungen* 45 (2003)).

49 Otto Demus, *The Mosaic Decoration of San Marco Venice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). Vikan, *Joseph Iconography* and Abdel-Malek, *Joseph Tapestries*, 10 ff. have discussed possible connections between San Marco and the Joseph tunics, though with no clear result. Jaś Elsner's work on the use of papyrus cartoons copied from manuscript illuminations as patterns for textiles and other media may suggest a pathway for influence from manuscripts to tunics to mosaics: Jaś Elsner, "Mutable, Flexible, Fluid: Papyrus Drawings for Textiles and Replication in Roman Art," *The Art Bulletin* 102, no. 3 (2020).

countered in our textual survey, most notably *On the Beautiful Joseph*, which survives in no less than four illuminated manuscripts.[50]

Thanks to such work we now know an astounding amount about the inventory of surviving Joseph tunics, and about how their pictorial program compares to representations of Joseph in other media. But we are no closer to the literature's goal of verifying 'Vorlagen', or of establishing directionalities of influence. The case remains what it was in 1938, when Ernst Kitzinger concluded that "it would be difficult to prove that the textiles are more closely connected with any one of these works than with others, and therefore, they do not help us to divide the illustrations of the life of Joseph in Early Christian art into an Egyptian and non-Egyptian group."[51]

Our goal, however, is not to identify originary templates, nor to divide works between Egypt and non-Egypt, or between religions. We seek rather to develop an approach capable of perceiving the ongoing production of both similarities and differences in the evidence that reach us from the past, and of suggesting contexts and processes of interaction or imagination that could have generated that dynamic production. Let us look once more at our textile archive with that goal in mind, and attempt to perceive what it can offer.

The medallion today preserved in Trier (figure 5) is typical of the extant *orbiculi*, which do indeed reflect a remarkably stable repertoire of scenes, as art historians have long recognized.[52] It depicts Joseph asleep in the center, dreaming of his own future. Two faces and eleven triangles represent the

50 Pächt, *Unknown Cycle*, 35 f.; Vikan, *Illustrated Manuscripts*; Standarthinger, *Recent research*, 289 f. The influence of Cotton Genesis and other illustrated manuscripts on the program at San Marco is well established by Herbert Kessler and others. See Herbert L. Kessler and Serena Romano, "A Hub of Art. In, Out, and Around Venice, 1177 – 1499", *Convivium* 7, no. 1 (2020); Herbert L. Kessler, "The Cotton Genesis's Pictorial Poetry," in *La Bibbia nell'alto medioevo* (LXXII Settimana di Studio), (Spoleto: Centro italiano di studi sull' alto medioevo, 2026 (forthcoming)).

51 Kitzinger, *Story of Joseph*, 267 – 68. Kitzinger's student Laila Abdel-Malek added in 1980 (without, however, in any way giving up the ideal of searching for *Vorlagen*): "Since what has reached us from antiquity is only a slight fragment of what once existed, one cannot overlook the possibility that there was another model that included the divergent features in the textiles." (Abdel-Malek, *Joseph Tapestries*, 99).

52 There are at least five other medallions showing the Joseph childhood cycle which have been almost completely preserved: in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York , Inv. Nr. 63.178.2; in The Phoebus Foundation, Antwerpen, Inv. Nr. 625; two in the Pushkin Museum Moscow Inv. Nr. 5173 and 5175; and one in Paris, Musée de la Mode et du Textile, Inv. Nr. 2337 and 29176; cf. the list provided by Vikan, *Joseph Iconography*, 105 – 7 and Abdel-Malek, *Joseph Tapestries.* All of them are dated to the eighth to tenth centuries.

Figure 5: Orbiculus with scenes form the story of Joseph. Egypt, seventh to eighth century CE. 30x28 cm, linen and coloured wool. Sammlung Wilhelm Rautenstrauch in the Stadtmuseum Simeonstift Trier, Inv.-Nr.: VII 52. Image: Bernhard Matthias Lutz, with courtesy.

sun, moon and stars, symbols of Joseph's parents and brothers prostrating before him (Gen 37:9 – 11; Q 12:4). The story unfolds counterclockwise around that inner medallion.[53] At the top Jacob, seated on a throne, sends Joseph – marked with a nimbus – to his brothers, collectively represented by one figure (Gen 37:13 – 14; Q 12:5 – 13). Joseph's brother puts him naked in a well (Gen 37:23 – 24; Q 12:15), sending a bloodstained garment back to

53 For the weaving technique, see Fluck, *Vestimenta Josephi*, 18, and Kathrin Mälck, "Technische Untersuchungen zu den Josefswirkereien," in *Realia Coptica. Als Festgabe zum 60. Geburtstag von Hermann Harrauer,* ed. Ulrike Horak (Wien: Holzhausen Verlag, 2001).

Figure 6: Sleeve trim of a Joseph tunic. Egypt, mid seventh-eighth century CE. 15,5x29,5 cm, linen and wool. Museum Schnütgen Köln, loan of the Peter and Irene Ludwig Foundation, Aachen. Image: Museum Schnütgen / Rheinisches Fotoarchiv Köln, Patrick Schwarz, with courtesy.

their father (Gen 37:31). The animal killed in Joseph's stead is depicted at the margin. The next scene shows Joseph being sold to a dark-skinned man sitting on a chair (Gen 37:28; Q 12:19 – 20), much as Jacob does at the top of the orbiculus. One of Joseph's brothers then stands at the empty well, holding his hands to his chest in a gesture of mourning or wonder (Gen 37:29 – 30). Once again arriving at the top of the medallion, this time on Jacob's left side, a dark-skinned man rides with Joseph to Egypt and sells him to his master (Gen 37:28.36; Q 12:21).

It is certainly true that these scenes could be understood within the general frame of the Genesis narrative, and interpreted without any knowledge of other texts we encountered in the Joseph archive, such as the Coptic *Narratio Joseph* or the Qur'an. But it is also true that this in no way exhausts their potential meaning. One way to look for hints of further riches is to linger on similarities and differences. Compare the scene of Joseph's sale into Egypt from a medallion today in Antwerp (figure 7) with the one in Trier. In some ways the two compositions are extremely similar. The slave-trader's dark skin, Joseph's backward gesture with both hands as he is borne away on horse (or camel?) behind the trader, all suggest an influential common tradition underlying both medallions. But the representation of Joseph's Egyptian purchaser differs in the two, with the Antwerp version depicting the purchaser with long blond hair. We should presume that hairstyle is significant (and indeed Joseph's hair is consist-

Figure 7: Orbiculus with scenes from the Joseph story. Egypt, eighth-ninth century CE. Woven linen with tapestry-woven woolen decoration. The Phoebus Foundation Antwerp, with courtesy.

ently differentiated throughout the program). But what is the significance here? Is the purchaser's long blond hair a marker of gender? If we interpret the purchaser as a women, it becomes tempting (though by no means dispositive) to see here a nod to the protagonism of Joseph's owner's wife in the Qur'an, a text that even justifies her passion as a forgivable even irresistible response to Joseph's overwhelming beauty (Q 12:29 – 33). Should we go so far as to imagine that this is a variant designed to appeal specifically to a sub-set of buyers familiar with the Qur'an? Or should we notice instead the similarity between the purchaser's hair style and that of Joseph's brothers in the roundel, who sport the same coiffeur in brown? If so, what is that similarity meant to signify? Although these differences were clearly intended to be meaningful, what the meaning is has been lost to us.

Again we reach the limits of confidence in what we can reconstruct from the past.

In the courts of historical methodology such efforts to perceive significance in small difference will rightly be judged as unproven, but that should not prevent us from straining. When we look at objects from the distant past we know we are but skimming the surface of the ocean of meanings produced by the inhabitants of that past. We can be certain, for example, that contemporaries attributed significance to Joseph's backward posture of supplication in all three of our examples – else why the pattern? That gesture is not a visual translation of any passage in Genesis or the Qur'an. We do not know what meaning, nor what traditions it might have been associated with, or might have itself inspired. An eleventh century Arabic source reports that when Joseph and his captor (now given the name Malik b. Duʿar) on their way to Egypt passed on camel-back the tomb of Joseph's mother Rachel, he could not restrain himself and leapt off to prostrate himself on her grave. (By the thirteenth century similar traditions could be found in all three religions: yet another example of co-production.[54]) Do antecedents of such traditions about Joseph's journey underlie his dynamic posture in these textiles? Or were there other traditions, or pictorial conventions about the expression of emotion, that gave his posture in these objects meaning to their audiences, traditions and conventions we no longer have access to? The only thing we can be certain of is that meaning was continually invented around Joseph, and presumably also continually lost.

We may find another hint of deep processes of co-production in the dark skin-color of the slave trader in the two medallions we are comparing, although again we cannot be certain of its meaning. The slave-trader's complexion is not mentioned in the Qur'an or in Genesis. The latter only designates the groups involved in the discovery and sale of Joseph by the ethno-tribal designations of Ishmaelite, Midianite, and Medanite (this last at Gen 37:36), groups that are not assigned skin color in the Hebrew Bible. But later Hellenistic and late antique ethnographers would imagine these biblical categories in terms of their own theories, with Christian and Muslim writers mapping the biblical ethno-tribal designations onto the peoples of the wide worlds they conquered. The early Islamic conquerors, for example, enslaved sub-Saharan Africans in large numbers, and their

54 Al-Thaʿlabī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ al-musammā ʿArā'is al-majālis* (Beirut: Dār al-Qalam): 117 (trans. Brinner, 196); Sefer HaYasher ch. 42, ns. 29–38. We thank David Gyllenhaal for these references. We anticipate that the current research of Theresa Shawcross will illuminate related Byzantine Christian traditions.

traditions came to associate Africans with the biblical figure of Ham, whose son Canaan is cursed with enslavement in Genesis, as punishment for his father's sin (cf. Gen 9:24 – 26). Similar interpretations emerged at much the same time among Christians and Jews.

Perhaps we should understand the skin-color of the slave-trader in these Joseph medallions as the product of this centuries-long process across all three traditions.[55] Or we might interpret the detail more locally, as the product of a specifically Egyptian experience of the slave trade's rapid expansion in the first centuries after the Muslim conquests. Many of the caravans of captured sub-Saharan peoples passed through Egypt on their forced march into slavery across the lands of Islam.[56] The slave trader's color might reflect Egyptian experience of this contemporary trade, projected backward onto the ethno-tribal categories of the Joseph story, a dynamic interplay between long-established discursive and iconographic traditions and local experience. In either case, we could see in these textiles evidence of the co-production of ideas about slavery, skin color, and race. But we should also note that other Joseph medallions, such as the one today preserved in Moscow (figure 8), do not darken the trader's skin. The weavers (and presumably also the purchasers) apparently made choices about the pictorial program, choices that influenced each other, and influenced as well the conventions and patterns that formed around the representation of Joseph's Egyptian dream.

What we are describing is perhaps not so much a methodology as a sensibility, one that seeks to recuperate some of the potential to generate meaning that the Joseph tunics may have once had in the world by relating both the regularity and the variation in their patterns to the many different textual and social contexts in which they were produced, worn, and seen. We have focused on Joseph's childhood and entry in Egypt, represented on

55 We can find traces of such ethnographic co-productions, as when al-Thalabi describes Mālik b. Durār (the name assigned by some Islamic traditions to the slave-trader) as "an Arab man of the people of Midian," Al-Thaʿlabī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ al-musammā ʿArā'is al-majālis* (Beirut: Dār al-Qalam): 117 (trans. Brinner, 195). On the development of "the curse of Ham" across all three traditions see David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

56 On slave trade in Egypt in the time of the tunics (mid eighth – tenth century), see Jelle Bruning, "Slave Trade Dynamics in Abbasid Egypt: The Papyrological Evidence," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 62 (2020); with special attention to the importance of Nubians: Anne Haour, "The Early Medieval Slave Trade of the Central Sahel: Archaeological and Historical Considerations," in *Slavery in Africa: Archaeology and Memory*, ed. Paul J. Lane and Kevin C. MacDonald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Figure 8: Round medaillon with scenes from the history of Patriarch Joseph. Egypt, seventh to tenth century CE. Moscow Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts; Inv.-nr. ИГ-890 I.1.a5173.

the overwhelming majority of the extant fragments. Other surviving ornaments from the tunics represented other parts of the story, such as the scene of Joseph's seduction by his owner's wife, his imprisonment and elevation to a high official at court, the reunion with his family, his wife Aseneth, or the blessing of his children at the end of his life.[57]

There are clearly patterns for the pictorial program of these textiles, patterns with a considerable regularity both of format and of scenes selected for visual representation, even if the quest for "origins" or *Vorlagen* is (in our view) misplaced. The selection may have been inspired by the different text traditions we have explored in the co-produced archive, or by traditions lost to us. And given the variations we have just pointed to within the regularity, it seems that artists, weavers, and purchasers could choose

57 On these scenes see Müller, *Joseph's Temptation*, 213–54.

between slightly different representations and traditions, differences that however slight, may have conveyed considerable meaning. We can even imagine that weavers chose visual programs to appeal to the broadest market, seeking buyers of all three faiths. What we should not doubt is that the imagery was comprehensible for the Jews, Christians and Muslims who wore and beheld it, though each might have comprehended it differently, depending on the traditions they knew best.

4. Wearer and Beholder as Sites of Co-Production

Let us shift our attention then from the textiles and their makers to their wearers and beholders, for they too were vital to the production of meaning, with their choices and interpretations themselves both shaping and shaped by the evolving textual and visual traditions surrounding Joseph. The move is a difficult one, because neither wearer nor beholder have left surviving trace, except through texts and textiles. Indeed the tunics have generally been found – like most surviving Egyptian textiles – in funerary contexts conjoint with the disappearance of their owners from this world. They served the deceased as outer-garment on this important and highly ritualized occasion, much as they presumably had done in life. These tunics were luxury items intended for public display, and Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike would have seen them not only in weavers' workshops, but also in markets and other public spaces of social and ritual importance, including communal events such as the festivals associated with the annual rise of the Nile, so crucial to Egypt's agricultural and economic success.

We know that these festivals provided regular opportunities for adherents of all three faiths to come together.[58] The Christian historian Severus of Al Ashmunein proudly recounts a prayer contest between Jews, Muslims, and Christians ordered by the caliph's governor Abu Aun because the Nile had not risen to sufficient height. After the Muslims and Jews had failed, the Christian Patriarch of Alexandria, Michael I (r. 744 – 768), together with Bishop Menas of Memphis, gathered all the Christian

58 We know of at least three annual Nile festivals that were celebrated by adherents of all three religions alike up to the Fatimid era: the *'Id al-schahid* in May to ritually animate the flood; the *nawruz* at the highest point of the flood in September, and the ceremony of diving (arab. *al-ghitas*) with which Christians celebrated epiphany and Jesus' baptism in January. Cf. Mary Kupelian, "Feste," in *Abrahams Erben am Nil. Juden, Christen und Muslime in Ägypten von der Antike bis zum Mittelalter*, ed. Cäcilia Fluck, Gisela Helmecke, and Elisabeth O'Connell (Berlin: Michael Imhof Verlag, 2015).

population, whose prayers caused the river to flow.[59] Such joint celebrations remained part of the ritual calendar for centuries. In 350/942, the Arab historian al-Masʿudi attended the "Night of the Immersion Bath" (*leylat al-ghitas*), a feast celebrated on 10 January (Christian Epiphany) by "hundreds of thousands of Muslims and Christians" (presumably an exaggeration), who "vied with each other in eating, drinking, in the splendor of their clothes (…), in music, and in dancing."[60] Why should we not imagine Joseph tunics among the vying vestments, and ask ourselves what meaning Muslims and Christians might have attributed to such objects in their competition?

Al-Masʿudi does not mention any Jews in his account, and the evidence for Jewish communities in Egypt during the centuries of late Byzantine and early Islamic rule is scant and obscure.[61] Jewish courtiers, diplomats and merchants are occasionally mentioned in both Christian and Muslim historical accounts of the early Islamic period,[62] but we can say little about their population, and even less about what they wore. We do know that wearing woolen wefts on linen warps would contravene the halachic prohibition on wearing clothes woven from two different fabrics (cf. Leviticus 19:19 and Deuteronomy 22:11). But we also know that religious norms and lived religion have often diverged: we cannot presume that all Jews at all

59 Severus of Al Ashmunein, *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria* III: Agathon to Michael I (ed. / trans. Evetts, 193 – 97).

60 Al-Masʿudi, *Murūj al-dhahab wa maʿādin al-jawāhir* (trans. Müller, *Joseph's Temptation*, 241); cf. Jill Kamil, *Christianity in the Land of the Pharaohs. The Coptic Orthodox Church* (London / New York: Routledge, 2002), 237 – 39, with a slightly different translation.

61 Tal Ilan, "Between the Hellenistic World and the Cairo Genizah," in *The Jews in Medieval Egypt*, ed. Miriam Frenkel (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2021), suggests that the Jewish community in late antique Egypt must have been similar in shape to the one that gave birth to the Cairo Genizah in the ninth century, but there is little evidence to either justify or disprove that claim. For the view that the (almost non-existent) evidence for Jewish populations in late antique Egypt is itself "coproduced" evidence, not for Jewish populations but for the role of Judaism in Egyptian Christian thought, see David Nirenberg, "Egypt, Empire and Judaism 650 BC–AD 650," in *Egypt and Empire, The formation of religious identity after Rome*, ed. E. R. O'Connell (Leuven: Peeters 2022), 319 – 20. From the ninth century on, the Egyptian Jewish community becomes more visible in documentary sources, see Petra Sijpesteijn, "Visible identities: In search of Egypt's Jews in early Islamic Egypt," in *Israel in Egypt: The Land of Egypt as Concept and Reality for Jews in Antiquity and the Early Medieval Period* (Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity 110), ed. Aloison Salvesen, Sarah Pearce and Miriam Frenkel (Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2020). Published again in *Egypt and Empire, The formation of religious identity after Rome,* ed. Elisabeth R. O'Connell (Leuven: Peeters 2022).

62 See, for example, the *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria IV: Mennas I to Joseph, 767 – 849* (ed. / trans. Evetts, 431).

times and places lived in absolute observance of the law.[63] A round linen and wool knitted fabric with a menorah, most likely a tunic trim like the Joseph textiles, does survive from Byzantine Egypt, but despite the apparently Jewish symbolism, we cannot say if it was worn by Jews.[64] The Fatimid period is more brilliantly illuminated by documents from the Cairo Genizah, which bring a vibrant community to light, and preserve dowry lists that attest to Jewish women possessing decorated tunics, though we do not know if they were of mixed textiles.[65] By that time we can also document the participation of Jews in multi-religious gatherings. An eleventh century rabbinical decree found in the Genizah testifies reluctantly to the mingling of Jews, Muslims and Christian at festivals, insofar as it finds it necessary to forbid attendance at such events.[66] In terms of clothing, none of these sources can prove that a Jew ever wove, wore, or saw a Joseph tunic, but they do help us delimit the realms of possibility.

There is a broader methodological point here. If our goal is to understand how a given visual representation of a foundational religious figure such as Joseph produced and generated meaning within past Muslim, Christian, and Jewish societies and cultures, it is not enough to limit our attention to the history of the representation or to the history of the textual traditions surrounding that figure within one tradition, or even across all three. We need to multiply our archives, searching for any evidence that can provide insight into contexts that might permit us to argue for possibilities and impossibilities of meaning at a given place or time.

The local is one such context, which may help us understand why Joseph proved so popular on the Egyptian textile stage in early Islamic times, far out-stripping other prophets esteemed in all three traditions, such as Abraham, Jonah and David. (We note that Joseph's woven dominance did not extend to other media in Egypt, where he was much less popular.)[67] Joseph was in some sense an Egyptian hero, with a local tradition of

63 See Gavin McDowell, Ron Naiweld, and Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, *Diversity and Rabbinization* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, University of Cambridge, 2021).

64 Musée du Louvre, Paris, Départment des antiquités égyptiennes. Inv. AF 6139.

65 See Yedida Kalfon Stillman, "Female Attire of Medieval Egypt. According to the Trousseau Lists and Cognate Material from the Cairo Genizah" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1972).

66 See Joel Kraemer, "A Jewish Cult of the Saints in Fatimid Egypt," in *L'Égypte fatimide – son art et son histoire. Actes du colloque organisé à Paris les 28,29 et 30 mai 1998*, ed. Marianne Barrucard (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1999).

67 The figure most often depicted on the Egyptian textiles after Joseph is David, followed by Abraham and Adam and Eve. Scenes from the New Testament or of apostles and angels are rarely found. But Joseph's dominance on textiles did not extend to other media in Egypt, where he was much less popular, as Abdel-Malek, "Joseph Tapestries," 105, notes.

veneration, as well as serving an important role within Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions as the most-powerful "non-pagan" leader in the history of Egypt as they understood it. Among Christians, Joseph was venerated as the legitimate successor of Serapis, the Ptolemaic god in charge of bringing the grain every year. It was he, according to some traditions, who had built the pyramids as storage houses for the grain during the famine.[68]

This too is a co-production, of the local with the prophetic archive, so to speak. And this too had productive consequences for the meaning that representations of Joseph could generate across all three religions. We know from pilgrimage reports, for example, that Christians visited what they believed to be the house of Aseneth in Heliopolis, and given the popularity of *Joseph and Aseneth* among Jews, it is plausible that they did so as well.[69] Towards the end of the tenth century, Muslim tourists were advised to stop by the house of a certain al Num'an in Fustat (today's Cairo) to admire a wall painting in which Joseph's light skin contrasted admirably with its dark background– an attraction that apparently lasted until the fourteenth century.[70] Locals and pilgrims also venerated the Serapeion of Saqqara, understood as the place of Joseph's imprisonment, according to several reports of Arab writers, such as the ninth century Murtata ibn al-Afifi's *Prodigies of Egypt*.[71] The conquerors ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ (ca. 640) and al-Ikhshidid (d. 968) are said to have prayed at this place upon their arrival in Egypt, suggesting that Muslim rulers could understand and represent themselves through Joseph in distinctive ways. An orbiculus featuring Joseph and his slave trader on the camel found in Saqqara establishes a direct link between texts and textiles.[72]

We can try imagine those ways. Beginning with the Islamic conquests, many Muslim rulers of Egypt came to the land as immigrants, like Joseph /

68 Cf. Müller, *Joseph's Temptation*, 234 – 36.239.

69 The house of Aseneth is mentioned in the twelfth century Petrus Diaconus, Liber de locis sanctis Y 2. Petrus probably owes this information to the fourth-century Itinerarium of Egeria. On the popularity of JosAs among Jews in the early Middle Ages, see Angela Standarthinger, "Zur Wirkungsgeschichte von Joseph und Aseneth," in *Joseph und Aseneth* (SAPERE XV), ed. Eckart Reinmuth (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009); on the archeological site see Gideon Bohak, *Joseph and Aseneth and the Jewish Temple in Heliopolis* (Early Judaism and Its Literature 10) (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996).

70 Al-Maqrizi, Al-khitat 11.6 – 7 (vol. 2, p.318), cf. Thomas Arnold, *Painting in Islam. A Study of the Place of Pictorial Art in Muslim Culture* (Oxford: Dover Publications, 1928), 106 – 7.

71 Murtada ibn al-ʻafif, *The Prodigies of Egypt* (trans. John Davis, 2015), see Müller, *Joseph's Temptation*, 236 – 8.

72 MAK Wien, Inv. no. T 417 – 1883, cf. *Fragile Remnants*, nr. 45 p. 98.

Yusuf, when God "established him in the land" with his blessing, according to the Qur'an (12:21.56). Ahmad ibn Tulun, a Turkic immigrant from Iraq and founder of the Tulunid dynasty in Egypt (r. 835 – 884), is a Muslim ruler who could have seen himself in Yusuf's story. He rose to power developing Egypt's role in the trade of gold and slaves from Africa to Baghdad, and pursuing a policy that sought to integrate Christians and Jews. Adherents of all three religions are said to have prayed in Fustat when Ibn Tulun fell ill and to have mourned together when he died.

Leaders of subordinate faiths could also be represented as Joseph, as when the afore-mentioned bishop Severus of Al-Ashmuein praised John IV, the Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria under Umayyad rule (r. 775 – 799): "Now Abba John was beautiful in form, perfect in stature, inspired by God in all his affairs. And everyone desired to behold his welcome form, and it was granted to him to be acceptable to all princes and governors, like Joseph the Truthful, with whom God's hand was, and whom God saved from all his sorrows, and to whom he gave grace and wisdom before the Pharaoh."[73] Even without imagining this Christian patriarch walking the streets of Alexandria in a Joseph tunic, we can understand how Joseph might have provided Christian and Jewish community leaders with a divinely sanctioned example of politics, legitimating their sometimes powerful service in the roles they played in the courts of Egypt's Muslim rulers.

Here too there is a co-production. How Muslims, Christians, and Jews imagined Joseph shaped how they imagined the possibilities for political life in a religiously plural society, and how they imagined possibilities for political life shaped how they thought about Joseph. The Fatimid rulers who rose to power after the Tulunids in Egypt took a very different course, building a new capital for their empire and shifting policy toward non-Muslims, including the issuing of clothing regulations for Jews and Christians.[74] At some point during this period, the Joseph tunics seem to have gone out of fashion.

73 Severus of Al Ashmunein, *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*, 19 (ed. / trans. B. Evetts, 393).

74 For a brief overview over the dynasties in Early Islamic Egypt see now Michael Cook, *A History of the Muslim World from its Origins to the Dawn of Modernity* (Princeton / Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2024), 300 – 314.

5. Dreaming with Joseph: Commonality and Competition

We do not mean to give the impression that the co-produced Joseph, whether textual or textile, was primarily integrative or pluralistic, however broad the appeal of its theme of virtue's triumph over adversity. After all, Joseph had dreamt of his brothers and parents bowing down before him. All three faiths could see possibilities for competition in this prophetic vision, and all availed themselves of the opportunity to imagine their own place in the history of salvation in terms of the bowing of others.

We have already touched upon this in the case of texts, when we described their exclusionary potential. We saw how for Jews such as Demetrius, Artapanus, Philo, or the authors and readers of *Joseph and Aseneth*, Joseph could represent separation from or superiority to Egyptian culture, while even (in the case of *Joseph and Aseneth*) offering non-Jews participation in Israel's salvific covenant. Later Rabbinic texts would declare Aseneth to be the daughter of Joseph's sister Dinah and record that she, just like Moses, was exposed as a newborn in Egypt, in this way reclaiming the Jewish origins of Joseph's wife and children.[75] We also saw how early Christian claims to be the legitimate heir of God's salvific covenant with Israel (cf. Romans 9:24 – 26; Hebrews 13:12 – 15; and Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho*) could produce interpretations of Joseph as a prefiguration of Christ. Examples multiply, as theologians such as Origen and John Chrysostom in the Greek East, and Tertullian, Ambrose, Augustine and Petrus Chrysologus in the Latin West, were captivated by Joseph's youthful dreams, drawing typologies between Joseph's conflicts and Jesus' with the Jews, and between Jacob's bowing to Joseph and Mary's veneration

75 Targum Pseudo-Jonathan presents Aseneth as the daughter of Dinah and Shechem (Dinah's rapist in Gen 34). Like all Rabbinic sources preserving this tradition, it contains strata that are clearly post-Islamic. (At Gen. 21:21, for example, it refers to a Fatima). See Leeor Gottlieb, "Towards a More Precise Understanding of Pseudo-Jonathan's Origins," *Aramaic Studies* 19 (2021). See also Masekhet Soferim ad 1,1:5; Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer (ed. Higger) 35 and 37. The 12th century Midrash Aggadah (ed. Buber) on Gen 41:45 aligns the fate of Aseneth with that of Moses in order to assert her Jewish origins. It tells the story how Jacob set out the baby Aseneth after she was borne in Shechem, putting a gold plate with the name of God and the newborn's story on it on her neck. When Potiphar finds her, he takes her in his care, recognizing her Jewish identitiy and declaring that she is "the daughter of a great people". Cf. Ross Shepard Kraemer, "Appendix: Aseneth in Rabbinic Traditions," in *When Aseneth met Joseph: a late antique tale of the biblical patriarch and his Egyptian wife*, ed. id. (New York: Oxford Academic Books, 1998).

of Jesus under the cross.[76] We know from liturgical manuscripts that the biblical story of Joseph was read on the days before Christmas and Easter in many Christian communities, and the wide dissemination of the sermon *On the Beautiful Joseph* may also indicate the popularity of typological interpretation of Joseph and his brothers,[77] an interpretation particularly prominent in the Syriac streams of Christianity that helped shape the landscape of earliest Islam.[78] We could also follow these competitive typologies forward in time and across media. The thirteenth century mosaics in Venice's San Marco mentioned above are one such example. In more northern climes, a Latin version of *Joseph and Aseneth* served Christian theologians in England as an argument for the conversion of Jews.[79]

The Muslim casting of Yusuf as a type for the Prophet Muhammad, alike in wisdom, virtue, and beauty, was also a competitive claim to salvific exclusivity, perhaps even an explicit counter-discourse to the Christian typology.[80] Much as Jews and Christians did, Muslims also explored their position in the genealogy and history of prophecy through the figure of Joseph, and in the process produced new ways of thinking about his story. We have already encountered one of those "new" ways, in the tradition about Joseph jumping off the slave-trader's camel when passing Rachel's tomb on the way to Egypt, and we saw how quickly that story was adopted and adapted in Jewish and Christian sources. There were many more. Joseph was the subject of frequent attention in the Islamic genre known as *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ (Stories of the prophets).* An eleventh century collection, for example, retells the story of the Egyptian master's wife (cf. Q 12:20 – 34), who in later Islamic poetry and literature is called Zulaykha. In this version, Zulaykha returns to Yusuf during the famine, they marry, and God restores her beauty, youth, and virginity, making her rather than Aseneth the mother of Joseph's sons.[81]

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76 For an overview over the figure of Joseph in Christian literature see Peter Pilhofer, "Joseph I (Patriarch)," *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 18 (1998); Emmanouela Grypeou and Helen Spurling, *The Book of Genesis in Late Antiquity: Encounters between Jewish and Christian Exegesis* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 323 – 36.

77 Standarthinger, *Recent research*, 290; cf. Martine Dulaey, "Joseph le Patriarche, Figure du Christ," in *Figures de l'Ancien Testament chez les Pères* (Strasbourg: Centre d'analyse et de documentation patristiques, 1989).

78 Kristian Heal, "Joseph as a Type of Christ in Syriac Literature," *Brigham Young University Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2002).

79 Ruth Nisse, "'Your Name Will No Longer Be Aseneth': Apocrypha, Anti-martyrdom, and Jewish Conversion in Thirteenth-Century England," *Speculum* 81 (2006).

80 See Rizk, *The Joseph Story in the Qur'ān and in the Syriac Tradition.*

81 Al-Kisa', *The Tales of the Prophets* (trans. Thackston, 179 – 80).

The story of Yusuf and Zulayka gave rise to its own vast network of traditions, as rich and colorful in the modern Islamic world as in the pre-modern. That tradition too is co-productive. It was, for example, inspired by Syriac Christian material and in turn inspired the Hebrew *Sefer HaYashar* and Shahin-i Shirazi's Judaeo-Persian *Bereshit-nāma*, a poem (*mathnawī*) on the Book of Genesis composed around 1358.[82] Here again, we see that the possibilities for interpretation amongst these three traditions were inter-related, with new traditions about Joseph quickly disseminating new potentials across their spaces of thought, and in the process re-mapping the possibilities for both distinction and dialogue.

We have multiplied archives so promiscuously that by now Joseph tunics are nearly lost from view. But without that multiplication, it is impossible to see how the tunics constitute an exemplary case of this historical dynamic we are calling co-production. Every time a Muslim, Christian, or Jew encountered such a tunic—whether on street or in sermon, woven or written, worn, illuminated, or imagined—they could project upon it and discover within it a vast diversity of ways in which to think about and experience their own past, present, and future.

"Could" does not of course mean "did": not every encounter with a signifying object produces attention or interpretation. Nor can we delimit the product of such encounters to any one direction or consequence. As we have shown, they could just as well reinforce convictions of difference as legitimate possibilities for collaboration. Moreover nearly all traces of the thoughts and experiences such encounters could catalyze are lost to us, making it difficult to see how Jews, Christians, and Muslims have co-produced meaning across their histories. We have turned to Joseph's tunic in our effort to strengthen our vision, not out of some vain forensic hope (like Jacob's) that the tunic can establish what "really happened" between Joseph and his brothers, between the faiths they came over time to represent, or between the living participants of those faiths on the streets of early Islamic Egypt. Our hope is rather that Joseph's tunic can help us

82 See J. T. P. de Bruijn and Barbara Flemming, "Yūsuf and Zulaykhk̲ā," *Encyclopaedia of Islam New Edition Online (EI-2 English)*, (Brill online, 2012). On the account in *Sefer ha-Yashar*, *parashat vayyeshev*, see also Edwin C. Goldberg, "Egyptian Women, Captivated by Joseph's Beauty, Cut Their Hands Slicing Citrons," *TheTorah.com* (2024). Zulayka also receives attention in Jacobs, *Joseph*.

dream historiographically, in an effort to imagine more of the possibilities of the past.

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Images

Figure 1: Tunic with applications from the Joseph cycle. Egypt, 670 – 880 CE. Clothing, tunic: linen 142x97 cm; knitwear: wool and linen, roundel 22,6 x28,5 cm. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Byzantinische Kunst; Id.Nr. 9109/9110. Image: Antje Voigt, CC BY-SA 4.0. With courtesy.

Figure 2: Tunic eighth-ninth century CE. Woven linen with tapestry woolen decoration, height 120x104 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum London, Acquisition Number 136 – 1891. With courtesy.

Figure 3: Vienna Genesis, folio 29. Sixth century CE. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. Theol. Graec. 31 HAN MAG, fol. 29. CC BY-SA 4.0, https://data.onb.ac.at/rep/106F8E6A (05. 11. 2025).

Figure 4: Vienna Genesis, folio 31. Sixth century CE. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. Theol. Graec. 31 HAN MAG, fol. 31. CC BY-SA 4.0, https://data.onb.ac.at/rep/106F8E6A (05. 11. 2025).

Figure 5: Orbiculus with scenes from the story of Joseph. Egypt, seventh to eight century. 30x28 cm; linen and coloured wool. Sammlung Wilhelm Rautenstrauch in the Stadtmuseum Simeonstift Trier, Inv.-Nr.: VII 52. Image: Bernhard Matthias Lutz. With courtesy.

Figure 6: Sleeve trim of a Joseph tunic, Egypt, mid seventh-eight century CE. 15,5x29,5 cm; linen and wool, Museum Schnütgen Köln, Loan of the Peter and Irene Ludwig Foundation, Aachen. Image: Museum Schnütgen / Rheinisches Fotoarchiv Köln, Patrick Schwarz.

Figure 7: Orbiculus with scenes from the story of Joseph. Egypt, eight to ninth century CE, woven linen with tapestry-woven woolen decoration. The Phoebus Foundation Antwerpen. With courtesy.

Figure 8: Round medaillon with scenes from the history of Patriarch Joseph. Egypt, seventh to tenth century CE. Moscow Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts; Inv.-nr. ИГ-890 I.1.a5173. With courtesy.

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