

Wearing the “Egyptian Dream” Joseph Tunics as Multi-layered Objects of Religious Co-production

by KATHARINA HEYDEN AND DAVID NIRENBERG

Shortly after the Muslim conquest of Egypt in 641 C.E., linen and woolen tunics decorated with colorful motifs from the story of Joseph the Dreamer became fashionable among wealthy urbanites. This fashion trend, co-produced between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, can tell us a great deal about how Egyptians of all three religions shared ideas about many subjects, from hopes for a fortunate life to stereotypes about skin color and the slave trade. These textiles also teach us that even what we do not know about past worlds can stimulate our thinking about religious co-production.



Fig. 1: Central medallion of Joseph-Orbiculus, Egypt, (7./8. cent.)
Stadt-museum Simeonstift Trier Inv. Nr. VII 52

Evidence of a fashion trend emerges from the desert sands of Egypt, whose dry embrace has preserved more than 70 fragments of wool and linen tunics decorated with scenes from the story of Joseph.

As told in chapters 37–40 of Genesis and in Sura 12 in the Qur'an, that story is gripping. It tells of a gifted and dreamy child, preferred by his father above his elder siblings, almost murdered by his jealous brothers, only to be plucked from death and sold into slavery in Egypt. His owner's wife, angered because he resisted her lascivious desires, has him imprisoned on false charges of rape. Released after proving a skilled interpreter of dreams, he is promoted to a position of great power at Pharaoh's court, where his foresight and strategy saves the Egyptian people and reunites his Israelite kin.

Small wonder such a story attracted interest. It was expanded into a Hellenistic novel, *Joseph and Asenath*, probably by a Greek-speaking Jew in Egypt in the first century, though the oldest surviving manuscript is a sixth century version in Old Syriac. In this version, after a long struggle against the desire of the many Egyptian women whose desire is kindled by his beauty,

Joseph marries Asenath, mentioned as his wife in Genesis 41:45 but now identified as the daughter of his owner Potiphar, converted to Judaism. Roughly a century later the (Christian? Jewish? Jewish-Christian?) *Testament of the Patriarchs* also dwells on the attempts of the Egyptian women to seduce Joseph. Another few centuries later we find twelve lengthy Syriac Christian sermons *On the most beautiful Joseph*. The Qur'an dedicated its longest continuous narrative to a biblical figure in the eponymous Sura 12, entitled *Yūsuf*, whose themes include Joseph's overwhelming beauty, patience in adversity, resistance to female seduction, and God's ultimate rewarding of virtue. And across this entire period, the rabbis of the Talmud drew on the Joseph of Genesis to think about love and jealousy, virtue and temptation, migration and homecoming, even the coming Messiah.

These texts, all of them produced before the tunics, constitute a form of co-production. In them we can see diverse communities of Jews, Christians, and Muslims adapting an ancient story, borrowing and translating it from one another, influencing each other's interpretations even as they tailored their own to their needs. Sometimes those needs were common. Joseph provided believers in all three faiths with an example of virtuous beauty, of hope even in deepest despair, and of the highs and lows of life in family, household, and court. Those needs could also be exclusive or competitive. Christian exegetes came to interpret Joseph, raised from the deadly pit, as a figure of Christ. Potiphar's lecherous and falsely accusing wife, on the other hand, they equated with the Jews and their Synagogue. In the Qur'an, *Yūsuf* criticizes those who associate partners with God, taking aim at both pagans and Christians. And according to Islamic tradition, the entire Sura was revealed in response to Jewish rivals who had induced the people of Mecca to test the Prophet Muhammad by asking him about Joseph.

Regardless of whether their goals are common or distinctive, in most of these texts we can tell what community produced them. It is otherwise with the woven story. All the surviving examples of Joseph tunics come from the first two centuries of Islamic rule, that is from roughly 650–850 C.E., when communities of all three faiths were present in Egypt. [...]



Fig 2: St. Menas Tunic, Egypt, from Akhmim/Panopolis necropolis; 7./8. cent., woven linen with tapestrywoven woolen decoration; 120x104 cm; Victoria and Albert Museum in London, Inv. Nr. 136-1891



Fig. 3: Joseph-Orbiculus, Egypt, (7./8. cent.), 30x 28 cm, white linen and colored wool, rep binding, flying needle; Stadtmuseum Simeonstift Trier Inv. Nr. VII 52

No tunic has been preserved intact, but we can deduce the arrangement of the ornaments from other tunics (Fig. 2). Most of the 70 extant decorative fragments of Joseph tunics spread around the world show scenes from Joseph's childhood, as in the circular piece, or orbiculum, at the Simeonstift in Trier (Figs. 1 and 3).

Even after deciphering the woven narrative, it is still not easy to know who wove it or who wore it. These were clearly precious objects, their story of redemption from death and the triumph of virtue over adversity making them an attractive choice not only for luxury garb but also for burial. (As is generally the case with

Egyptian textiles from this period, our surviving examples all come from funeral contexts.) Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike could have seen the Joseph tunics being worn in markets and other public spaces, or at communal events such as funeral ceremonies or the annual Nile festival, celebrated jointly by adherents of all three religions. We can call the garments "Egyptian," but can we call them Jewish, Christian, or Muslim?

The tunics are generally classified as Coptic, a term used for Egyptian Christians since late antiquity. But these textiles do not have any specifically Christian detail in their pictorial program. Moreover, Joseph tunics only became fashionable under Umayyad Muslim rule (starting in mid seventh century), as material-based dating has recently proven. What might the trend owe to Islam?

Scholars have often assumed that the tunics must have been worn exclusively by Christians because Rabbinic and Islamic law sometimes forbade figurative décor. But written record of these laws post-dates our garments, and, in any case, prohibitions often enough target lived realities. We know that many Islamic (and also Jewish) societies not only tolerated but celebrated figural representation of prophets and kings. The Umayyad caliphs themselves decorated the walls of their palaces and even their coinage with human figures. And long after the Umayyads, the historian al-Maqrizi reports that in tenth century Cairo, people would stop by the house of a Muslim named al-Nu'man to see a painting of Joseph on his wall, because they admired the way in which the painter had made the white body of Yūsuf stand out against the dark background.

The historical archive we possess today does not allow us to name with any certainty the religion of the weavers or the wearers of these tunics. This is only in part because of the paucity of the evidence: it is also because these objects were so thoroughly co-produced by Christians, Muslims, and Jews. We've already touched on one level of this coproduction: the textual story of Joseph had passed through many hands as it made its way from Hebrew to Septuagint Greek to the Aramaic, Coptic, and Syriac Christian translations of the "Old Testament" to the Arabic of the Qur'an, and thence to countless collections of stories. [...]

In fact, the textile Joseph was just as co-produced as the textual. The absence of specifically Christian motifs and the emergence of the woven Joseph story under early Islam is not exceptional, but rather representative of the history of Egyptian clothes. Dionysian-pagan motifs predominated on textiles throughout the Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine periods in Egypt, even during centuries of Christian dominance. Biblical motifs emerged only with the arrival of Islam, which seems to have caused a change in pictorial program that we might characterize as anti-pagan, rather than the iconoclasm one might expect. In other words, the mere existence of biblical motifs on Egyptian textiles is

already a religious co-production.

In the specific case of the Joseph motif, some of its particulars might also point to traces of co-production. Much more than the account in Genesis, the Qur'an emphasizes the role of Joseph's owner's wife, making her a protagonist of the story, and even justifying her passionate response to Joseph's overwhelming beauty (12:29–33). Perhaps this explains why, in some examples, the slave owner may be represented as a woman rather than a man (Fig. 4).

There are other hints at deep processes of co-production. The Umayyad period saw the rapid expansion of a vast trade in sub-Saharan peoples, as the new Islamic rulers sought to build an enslaved labor force (called the Zanj) for the marshy lands of southern Iraq. The striking blackness of the slave trader in the orbiculi might reflect Egyptian experience of this contemporary trade. Or it could be the product of a centuries-long process whereby Hellenistic, Christian, and Islamic ethnographers attempted to map biblical designations such as Ishmaelite and Midianite (as Genesis names the groups involved in the discovery and sale of Joseph) onto the peoples of the world they conquered.



Fig. 4: Detail of Joseph Orbiculus, Egypt, 7./8. cent., woven linen with tapestry-woven woolen decoration; Stiftung Phoebus Antwerpen, Inv.-Nr. 625

By the time the story of Joseph emerged onto textile under the Umayyads, it already had a very long history. Every moment in that history produced many different but inter-related meanings within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. For Jews such as Artapanus, Philo, and Josephus, Joseph was the patriarch who brought Judaism to Egypt and helped establish a flourishing Empire. For Christians, Joseph's triumph over mortal adversity served as a prefiguration of Christ. Theologians such as Origen and Tertullian were captivated by Joseph's youthful dreams, drawing parallels between the conflicts Joseph and Jesus had with their brothers, and between Jacob's bowing to Joseph and Mary's veneration of Jesus under the cross. For Muslims, Yūsuf was akin to the prophet Muhammad in the combination of wisdom, virtue, and beauty, as the passionate attention paid to Joseph in an eleventh-century collection of *Lives of the Prophets* demonstrates.

But the Umayyad moment also reminds us that Muslims, Jews, and Christians not only shared many meanings of the Joseph story, but also constantly reshaped their understanding of that story in relation to each other. In the generations after the Arab conquest of Egypt, Joseph came to do new work for believers of all three faiths. Joseph was, after all, the quintessential immigrant to Egypt, an aspect emphasized in the Qur'an, which repeats (at v. 21 and 56) that "This is how We established Joseph in the land, so that We might teach him the interpretation of dreams / so that he settled wherever he pleased."

For Muslims in Umayyad Egypt, "the land" was the one they now ruled as newcomers, much as Joseph had. For Jews and Christians, Joseph could provide an example of how to serve in some of the many, sometimes very powerful, roles they would play in the courts of Egypt's Muslim rulers over the centuries. Severus of Al Ashmuein, for example, drew on Joseph to praise the skills of John IV, the Christian 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." From such examples we can see how Joseph's relationship to Pharaoh could serve Umayyad Egyptian elites of all faiths as a divinely sanctioned example of politics in a religiously plural society.

We may not be able to say whether the Joseph textiles were Christian, Jewish, or Muslim. But what we can say with certainty is that they were a co-production, one that articulated new possibilities for co-existence of the three religions in Egypt. ■