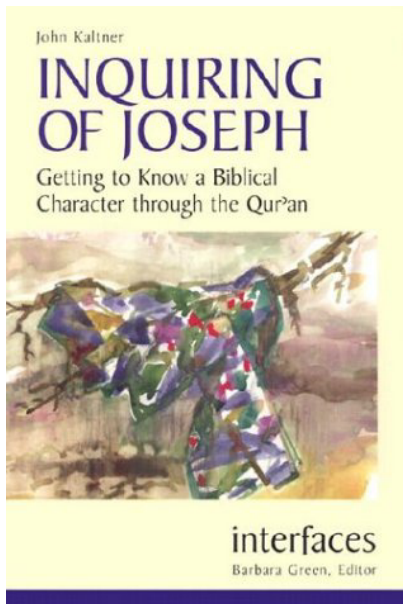


RBL 06/2004



Kaltner, John

Inquiring of Joseph: Getting to Know a Biblical Character through the Qur'an

Interfaces

Collegeville: Liturgical Press/Michael Glazier, 2003.
Pp. xx + 132. Paper. \$14.95. ISBN 0814651534.

R. Christopher Heard
Pepperdine University
Malibu, CA 90263

In this addition to the Interfaces series, John Kaltner presents parallel readings of the Joseph stories in the Bible and the Qur'an. Kaltner announces at the outset his intention to use comparative analysis and narrative criticism to illuminate these stories. At the same time, the study serves as an introduction, by example, to both of these methods. Kaltner's introduction to the book describes the entire exercise as an "interface" (after the name of the series) or "dialogue" between the biblical and qur'anic Josephs. Although Kaltner does not quite get to an actual "dialogue" between the Josephs, he does invite readers to consider valuable issues of both interpretive content and methodology in reading his focal texts side by side.

Setting the Joseph stories in the Bible and Qur'an alongside each another, Kaltner deftly shows, episode by episode, both how these stories mirror one another and how they differ. Of course, Kaltner penetrates beyond a mere cataloging of the obvious narrative similarities and differences; he also shows how the smaller similarities and differences add up to comprise larger-scale thematic dimensions of the two presentations. The two stories illuminate one another in Kaltner's presentation primarily by exposing alternate possible tellings of the story. Repeatedly one or the other of the two versions uniquely develops a particular theme or includes a scene or speech that the other does not. When readers see in each version what could have been emphasized, but was not, they can

better appreciate and highlight the actual story narrated in one or the other of the Bible and Qur'an.

The narrative-critical dimension of the study is evident in the chapter titles: "Beginnings"; "The Narrator and Characters"; "Events"; "Repetition"; "Gaps"; and "Endings." These titles reflect the narrative-critical focus in each chapter, but as the main *titles* of the chapters they may tend to imply that the narrative-critical focus is the main *topic*, when the focus actually and appropriately lies on the Joseph stories themselves. Naturally, Kaltner does not limit himself to discussing, for example, repetition only in chapter 4. He recognizes, of course, that *all* the tools of narrative criticism can be useful *throughout* either version of the Joseph story; he makes this recognition explicit in the introduction. Even so, by foregrounding selected narrative strategies episode by episode, he does bring these techniques into sharp focus. Readers get to see each technique "in action," and Kaltner helps readers understand how the use of speech, narrated time, repetition, ambiguity, and so on serve to advance (or impede) the stories' plots and themes.

Readers will undoubtedly learn more from this study about the version of the Joseph story with which they are less familiar. The book especially rewards students unfamiliar with either version, with the concept of comparative analysis, or with the questions of narrative criticism. However, some of Kaltner's choices—including those that seem to be motivated by concern for student readers—limit the book's value even for students.

Although choosing to use narrative-critical methodology, Kaltner specifically disclaims any rejection in principle of historical-critical questions. The narrative-critical analyses he presents expose significant similarities and differences in the biblical and qur'anic accounts of Joseph's life. The differences, in particular, may stimulate readers to ask after the reasons for the particular choices made in each presentation. Unfortunately, Kaltner himself rarely pursues that further question. For example, Kaltner's demonstration that the Qur'an's Joseph story highlights the theme of knowledge in unique ways does not then issue into any sustained consideration of why this should be so beyond mere narratorial choice. The social and religious functions of the narratorial choices and thematic highlights remain unexplored in this volume. Those omissions may be corollaries of Kaltner's decisions to use narrative criticism as the primarily vehicle for his comparative analysis. Narrative criticism need not be practiced, however, solely in a formalist mode, and the unasked "why" questions—questions of origin and function—would have enriched the "what" questions that Kaltner asks quite well. The sense of unasked and unanswered questions with which readers might leave this volume could and perhaps should stimulate scholars to ask just what constitutes narrative criticism and whether the "why" questions that explore the *reasons* that certain themes, images, and

narratorial techniques were chosen, and others rejected, should be part and parcel of narrative criticism itself or should be considered separate approaches.

Most problematically, Kaltner chooses not to document the contributions of other scholars to his understanding of comparative analysis, narrative criticism, and the biblical and qur'anic Joseph stories. Not a single footnote appears in the entire volume, although Kaltner does provide a two-page list of suggested further readings at the end of the book. Kaltner attempts to justify the omission of footnotes by claiming that doing so keeps the focus of the study squarely on the biblical and qur'anic Joseph stories. For a volume that purports to try to introduce students to two scholarly approaches to narratives—comparative study and narrative criticism—this choice seems misguided. The danger is that students may “learn” from Kaltner’s presentation that scholarly study of a biblical or qur'anic narrative consists primarily in the application of selected methods to the object of study. Scholarship does demand methodological rigor and self-consciousness, of course, but Kaltner’s presentation may imply that methodologies such as comparative analysis and narrative criticism “exist” as independent, well-defined “things” near to hand for any scholar simply to pick up and use. That is, Kaltner’s omission of documentation effaces the role that scholars play in the development of the very methodologies they employ. For example, Kaltner uses the vocabulary of “round” and “flat” characters, but students do not learn from Kaltner that narrative critics owe this distinction to E. M. Forster’s 1927 Clark Lectures (published in 1928 as *Aspects of the Novel*).

At the same time, scholarship consists of much more than isolated scholars independently applying the tools of their trade. Scholarship also consists in ongoing conversations among scholars, conversations that stretch across time and space. For readers unfamiliar with the literature on a certain topic or methodology—such as the students whom *Inquiring of Joseph* seeks to serve—an author’s footnotes open doors to the wider conversation and show how that wider conversation has influenced that particular author. Kaltner tells his readers that he has learned much from consulting the suggested readings, but he does not demonstrate to his readers *how* those readings have affected his own procedures and interpretations. Kaltner’s omission of footnotes may thus inadvertently suggest to students that specifying the sources of and influence upon one’s ideas is a dispensable distraction in scholarly work or that a “works cited” page constitutes sufficient documentation for a research project, neither of which are “lessons” students ought to be learning.

The lack of documentation is unfortunate not just because it sets a bad example for student readers, the book’s chief audience, but also because it leaves scholarly readers with the impression that Kaltner has made dismissive or summary judgments where such

judgments are inappropriate. For example, Kaltner does not include Gen 38, which has no qur'anic parallel, in his analysis, although he does analyze the qur'anic story of the dinner party thrown by Potiphar's wife, which has no biblical counterpart. Kaltner claims that the dinner-party story is well integrated into its context, implying that Gen 38 is not. On the other hand, Kaltner recognizes that some scholars find Gen 38 integral to the Joseph story. Yet Kaltner simply posits that Gen 38 interrupts the flow of the Joseph story and does not substantively advance that story. In fact, powerful arguments could be made that Gen 38 advances in significant ways the theme that runs throughout the Joseph story of clothing being used to reveal or conceal identity and/or to confer status. (Joseph's coat, Tamar's veil, Joseph's tunic in the hands of Potiphar's wife, Pharaoh's ring, and the five suits of clothes Joseph gives to Benjamin are the most obvious examples.) One might also argue that the characterization of Judah in Gen 42–50 (Kaltner focuses especially on Judah's speech in Gen 44) is illuminated by the characterization of Judah in Gen 38. At the very least, even a purely formalist narrative analysis of Gen 37–50 would need to take account of what Gen 38 is doing there. The weakness here is not so much Kaltner's decision to omit Gen 38 as the fact that Kaltner does not discuss the issue enough to enable readers to agree or disagree with his decision; only those who have already pondered the relationship of Gen 38 to Gen 37 and 39–50 could evaluate the omission.

Without necessarily intending to do so, Kaltner raises in this volume the question of just what a comparative analysis of biblical and qur'anic texts ought to be. In the introduction and afterword, Kaltner uses the image of the Qur'an's Joseph and the biblical Joseph "interfacing" or dialoguing with one another. But in Kaltner's treatment, no such dialogue really seems to occur. Kaltner very clearly shows readers two Josephs and two Joseph stories. Other than highlighting alternate narrative possibilities, however, the two stories never interpenetrate in Kaltner's treatment. The book bears the subtitle *Getting to Know a Biblical Character through the Qur'an*, but in the final analysis readers of this study get to know the biblical Joseph through the Bible and the Qur'an's Joseph through the Qur'an. It may well be that the volume could not fulfill the promise of its subtitle without engaging the murkier waters of poststructuralist notions of intertextuality. Intertextual readings truly facilitate the interfacing and interpenetration of texts; Kaltner's presentation seems more like parallel readings than a vibrant exchange or dialogue between two stories or characters. The imagery of the subtitle, introduction, and afterword raises a particular set of expectations, while the execution meets a slightly different set of expectations—and, in this dissonance, the volume invites further discussion of and reflection upon the methodology of comparative analysis itself.

Students and scholars should attend to Kaltner's book for different reasons. Students will reap both methodological and content-oriented benefits; many will understand the Qur'an's Joseph story, the Bible's Joseph story, narrative criticism, and comparative

analysis better than they did before reading the work. Students will *not*, however, learn from this volume how interpretive work and the development of scholarly methodologies take place in a community of scholarship. Advanced students might find *Inquiring of Joseph* inviting them to step beyond parallel readings to intertextual studies. Scholars well versed in the book's focal texts and methodologies will not find many new trails being blazed here, but they may very well find themselves stimulated to think about the contours of narrative criticism and comparative analysis as such. That stimulation should be welcomed as a useful, if perhaps unintended, benefit of this volume.