

Narrative and Meaning in Surah Yūsuf: A Critical Hermeneutic Analysis

Afshan Ishfaq

Lecturer, Department of English, Green International University, Lahore

Nida Sultan

Lecturer in English, NAMAL University, Mianwali

Abstract

This study examines Surah Yūsuf through the lens of narrative ethics and hermeneutics, demonstrating how the Qur'an communicates moral guidance not only through explicit injunctions but through the design and coherence of its stories. By applying a critical hermeneutic framework informed by Gadamer and Ricoeur, the research traces how motifs such as dreams, betrayal, patience, and forgiveness structure meaning across the surah. Classical tafsīr traditions, including the works of al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurtubī, and Ibn Kathīr, are brought into dialogue with contemporary interpretive approaches to highlight both continuities and methodological tensions. The findings show that ethical insights in Surah Yūsuf emerge from its narrative arc and symbolic motifs, which reinforce Qur'anic values of restraint, justice, and reconciliation. In doing so, the study models a replicable hermeneutic method that honours exegetical tradition while addressing modern questions of morality, identity, and human resilience.

Keywords: Qur'an, Surah Yūsuf, Narrative Ethics, Hermeneutics, Tafsīr, Coherence, Narrative Theology

I. Introduction

Background and Rationale

Surah Yusuf, the twelfth chapter of the Qur'an, is a complete and coherent narrative that models how scripture teaches through story. It opens with a claim about clarity and meaningful telling: "We relate to you the best account in what We have revealed to you of this Qur'an" [Q 12:3]. The chapter compresses a full life course into a single arc, moving from dream to trial to authority and reconciliation. Because it is a unified story, it offers a strong test case for hermeneutics, that is, for disciplined interpretation that connects text, reader, and context over time (Gadamer 2004; Ricoeur 1976). Classical exegetes examined this chapter with care. They discussed its language, its legal hints, and its moral guidance, often verse by verse and with attention to reports from early authorities (al-Tabari, n.d.; al-Qurtubi, n.d.; Ibn Kathir 2003). Modern scholarship adds questions about narrative design, metaphor, character, and voice, along with reception across cultures and periods (Izutsu 2002; Nasr 2015). A critical hermeneutic approach can bring these lines together. It studies how meaning arises through a cycle of reading, questioning, and re-reading, while remaining accountable to the Arabic text, to the surah's structure, and to responsible use of sources (Gadamer 2004; Ricoeur 1984).

This chapter proposes a study that reads Surah Yusuf as narrative theology. The focus is on how the story conveys guidance on trust, patience, restraint, justice, and forgiveness. For example, "Do not despair of the mercy of Allah" [Q 12:87] anchors a stance of hope in the middle of loss. A hermeneutic reading can show how such claims are prepared by earlier scenes, echoed by images and key words, and confirmed by the resolution at the end of the chapter.

Problem statement

There is rich tafsīr on Surah Yusuf. Yet, systematic work that applies hermeneutic theory to its narrative features, while dialoguing with classical exegesis, is limited. Many studies extract moral lessons or philological notes, and some focus on a single episode. Fewer studies trace how meaning develops across the whole storyline, how symbols function across scenes, and how classical and contemporary readings can correct or support each other. This study addresses that gap by bringing a critical hermeneutic method to the entire surah, with close attention to language, structure, and reception.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To map the narrative structure, including plot stages, focalization, and shifts in voice, and to link those features to moral guidance.
2. To analyse key motifs and terms in Arabic, such as sabr, ihsan, taqwa, burhan, and tawba, and to examine their role in meaning-making within the story world.

3. To reflect on reception, that is, how readers can responsibly apply the surah's guidance in modern settings while remaining faithful to the text and to sound method.

Research questions

1. How does the narrative design of Surah Yusuf generate meaning across its scenes and turning points, and how do these meanings relate to ethical action?
2. Which symbols and keywords carry the story's argument, and how does the Arabic wording shape their force?
3. How can a critical hermeneutic method protect against selective proof-texting and promote ethical reading in plural contexts today?

Statement of the Problem:

The main problem this study addresses is the lack of a comprehensive hermeneutic analysis of Surah Yūsuf that treats its narrative as a coherent whole. Classical tafsir offers rich commentary but often isolates verses, while modern studies highlight literary or thematic aspects without fully integrating ethical and theological meaning. This gap leaves the surah either fragmented into lessons or reduced to literature, with little focus on how narrative design itself conveys guidance. The study therefore takes up the challenge of reading Surah Yūsuf through a critical hermeneutic lens, bridging classical insights with contemporary questions, and showing how its story communicates enduring moral and social relevance.

Theoretical framework

This study uses two linked anchors in hermeneutics. First is Gadamer's account of understanding as a "fusion of horizons," which insists that meaning arises in the meeting of text and reader under the guidance of tradition and language norms (Gadamer 2004). Second is Ricoeur's theory of narrative and the "surplus of meaning," which treats plot, symbol, and metaphor as engines of understanding that exceed paraphrase yet are not vague. They are testable by coherence, by fit with the whole, and by cross-text echoes (Ricoeur 1976, 1984).

The framework is adapted to Qur'anic studies in three ways.

- **Text priority:** The Arabic wording, syntax, and discourse markers set boundaries on any claim about meaning.
- **Tradition awareness:** Classical tafsir supplies arguments, not just quotations. The study engages their reasons, categories, and use of reports.
- **Reader responsibility:** The modern reader brings questions shaped by current life. Hermeneutics requires reflexivity, clarity about assumptions, and willingness to revise readings that do not fit the text as a whole.

Corpus and sources:

The primary text is Surah Yusuf in Arabic. The study consults two reliable English renderings for triangulation, for example Abdel Haleem and Asad, with clear citation when quoting. Classical commentaries include al-Tabari's *Jami al-bayan*, al-Qurtubi's *al-Jami*, Ibn Kathir's *Tafsir*, and al-Razi's *Mafatih al-ghayb*. Modern reference works include Nasr's *The Study Quran* for annotated translation and thematic notes. Hermeneutic theory is drawn from Gadamer and Ricoeur, with lexical-semantic support from Izutsu.

Methodology Overview:

The method follows a disciplined cycle:

Preparatory Reading: Read the surah in Arabic several times, mark discourse units, refrain lines, and scene breaks. Note narrative cues such as dreams, oaths, and evaluative comments.

Close Analysis: For each unit, identify plot function, key terms, pronoun shifts, and rhetorical devices.

Classical Dialogue: Consult major tafsir on each unit. Extract their core claims and reasons, including linguistic evidence and reports. Code points of agreement and tension with the preliminary reading.

Synthesis and Testing: Rebuild a whole-surah reading that accounts for data across scenes. Test by coherence, by intertext links within the Qur'an, and by parsimony.

Application Reflection: Frame how the reading informs conduct and public ethics without forcing the text to answer questions it does not address. State limits with care.

This design uses qualitative textual analysis, supported by a transparent audit trail of notes and coded claims. Claims are tethered to textual evidence and to cited sources. The aim is interpretive rigor, not novelty for its own sake.

Ethical considerations

Working with a sacred text calls for respect, accuracy, and transparency.

The study will:

- Cite Arabic phrasing and translations with exact verse numbers.
- Distinguish clearly between the Qur'anic text, classical interpretations, and the author's analysis.
- Avoid sectarian polemics. Report contested points with fairness and document competing readings.
- Disclose positionality. The author's background, aims, and limits are stated, since no reader is neutral in practice.

- Ensure proper attribution for all sources and avoid dependence on weak or unattributed material.

Scope and delimitations

The study covers the Arabic text of Surah Yusuf only. It does not attempt a full historical-critical reconstruction of events outside the Qur'an, and it does not assess every legal inference drawn in the tradition. It focuses on narrative meaning, ethics, and reception. It draws selectively on classical sources when they speak to the narrative or to a contested lexical issue.

Key concepts and working definitions

- **Hermeneutics:** The disciplined study of interpretation that treats understanding as dialogical and historically situated, yet bounded by the text (Gadamer 2004).
- **Narrative identity:** The way a self or a community understands itself through story, formed by plot, memory, and promise (Ricoeur 1984).
- **Motif:** A recurring element, image, or phrase that cues meaning across scenes. Examples include the shirt, the dream, and the well.
- **Sabr and Taqwa:** Patience and God-conscious restraint, paired in Q 12:90 as keys to the outcome.
- **Burhan:** A decisive sign or proof that halts wrongdoing, noted in the episode of temptation, Quran:12:24.

Preliminary textual cues

Two samples show how the study will work with Arabic and context.

The claim of clarity and quality of telling. "We relate to you the best account" sets a standard for the chapter's teaching function, not a ranking of stories for style alone. The following verses confirm that the account is not entertainment but guidance for those who ask and reflect, Q: 12:3, 12:111. This supports a method that seeks meaning in structure, not in isolated lines.

The ethic of hope. "Do not despair of the mercy of Allah," Q 12:87, appears during the famine search. The timing matters. The command is not generic advice. It is placed when loss could fracture the family beyond repair. The placement strengthens the claim that hope is a duty tied to action, search, and fairness in distribution.

Significance of the Study:

The study shows how narrative features shape ethical meaning across the full chapter by applying explicit tests of coherence and intertextual fit. It further demonstrates a structured dialogue with classical tafsir, honouring their arguments while also engaging with contemporary questions. In doing so, it models a transparent method and reflexive stance that readers and teachers can adapt for the interpretation of other narrative passages.

2. Literature Review

Classical Exegesis of Surah Yūsuf

Surah Yūsuf has received sustained attention in the tafsir tradition because of its unique status as the only Qur'anic chapter devoted entirely to one prophet's story. Al-Tabari's *Jāmi' al-bayān* offers detailed philological analysis, often citing early reports to explain lexical nuances and contextualize events (al-Tabari, n.d.). Al-Qurtubi's *al-Jāmi' li-ahkām al-Qur'an* highlights moral and legal implications, noting lessons about kinship, justice, and honesty in transactions (al-Qurtubi, n.d.). Ibn Kathir integrates narrations from Isra'ilīyyat traditions while stressing patience and divine providence as central themes (Ibn Kathir, 2003). Al-Razi in *Mafātīh al-ghayb* combines philosophical reflection with rhetorical analysis, emphasizing divine wisdom in the sequencing of events (al-Razi, n.d.).

These works establish a foundation of linguistic precision and theological commentary. Yet, they typically proceed verse by verse, treating the narrative as a sequence of episodes rather than a single structured story. While rich in detail, this atomistic method leaves open the question of how the surah's coherence and narrative arc produce meaning as a whole.

Modern Qur'anic Studies on Narrative

Contemporary scholarship has increasingly studied Qur'anic narratives in terms of form, structure, and reader response. Izutsu (2002) draws attention to the semantic fields of Qur'anic terms, demonstrating how key words such as *sabr* and *taqwa* function as ethical anchors. Angelika Neuwirth (2010) situates Qur'anic stories within Late Antiquity, noting how the Qur'an reshapes existing narrative forms to convey its theological vision. Nasr's *The Study Quran* (2015) provides a modern annotated translation that highlights literary and thematic dimensions, though often summarizing rather than systematically analyzing narrative coherence.

Specific studies of Surah Yūsuf point to its artistry. Kermani (1999) describes its storytelling style as unparalleled, stressing emotional depth. Mir (1986) shows how repetition, motifs, and contrast generate meaning, making Surah Yūsuf a case study for Qur'anic narrative analysis. These works illuminate literary design but often underplay the hermeneutic dimension — how readers negotiate meaning across history and context while engaging both the narrative form and its ethical claims.

Hermeneutics and Narrative Theory

Hermeneutics, as developed by Gadamer (2004) and Ricoeur (1976, 1984), provides a framework for understanding how texts produce meaning through dialogue between text and reader. Gadamer's concept of "fusion of horizons" insists that meaning emerges through the interplay of tradition, language, and reader context. Ricoeur advances the idea of "narrative identity," where plot and symbol shape human self-understanding. For him, stories generate a "surplus of meaning" that exceeds literal paraphrase yet remains accountable to coherence and intertextual resonance. These theories have been applied in theology and literary studies, but their use in Qur'anic scholarship is less developed. Some scholars (Rahman, 1982; Ayoub, 1997) argue for contextual and thematic readings of the Qur'an, which resonate with hermeneutic concerns but do not explicitly engage Gadamer or Ricoeur. Recent works on Qur'anic hermeneutics (Saeed, 2006; Arkoun, 1994) push for methods that acknowledge reader responsibility and the historical dimension of interpretation. Yet very few studies bring this into direct conversation with Surah Yūsuf's narrative unity.

Hermeneutics, as a discipline, has traditionally been associated with Biblical studies, philosophy, and interpretive methodologies in the humanities (Palmer, 1969; Ricoeur, 1981). However, within Islamic scholarship, interpretive traditions such as tafsir, usul al-tafsir, and balagha have long provided methodological frameworks for understanding the Qur'an. Scholars like al-Tabari, al-Razi, and Ibn Kathir approached Surah Yūsuf with theological, moral, and linguistic emphases, underscoring its status as "*the most beautiful of stories*" (Qur'an 12:3). Their commentaries often highlight themes of divine wisdom, patience in adversity, and the moral exemplarity of prophets. These works form the classical foundation for Qur'anic interpretation and remain crucial interlocutors in contemporary hermeneutic inquiry.

Modern scholarship has expanded the interpretive lens by applying literary and hermeneutic tools to the Qur'an as a narrative text. Scholars such as Angelika Neuwirth (2000), Mustansir Mir (1986), and Michael Sells (1999) emphasize the Qur'an's literary coherence, intertextuality, and rhetorical force. Specifically, Mir's work on coherence (*nazm*) in the Qur'an foregrounds how narrative structure contributes to thematic unity, a framework especially relevant for Surah Yūsuf, which uniquely unfolds as a complete story rather than fragmented episodes. Contemporary hermeneutic studies also engage with Gadamer's (1975) notion of the *fusion of horizons*, where the reader's context interacts dynamically with the text. This approach allows Surah Yūsuf to be read not only as a historical narrative but also as a dialogical text that continues to speak to issues of exile, migration, forgiveness, and ethical resilience.

Recent works in Qur'anic hermeneutics stress reflexivity and methodological transparency (Rahman, 1980; Arkoun, 2002). Fazlur Rahman's principle of *double movement* advocates a historical understanding of the text in its revelatory context followed by an application of its ethical principles to the present. Applied to Surah Yūsuf, this method allows scholars to draw ethical meaning from Joseph's trials and eventual triumph, contextualizing them for contemporary struggles such as displacement, family rupture, and social injustice. Similarly, Nasr Abu Zayd (2006) argued for recognizing the Qur'an's discursive and interpretive plurality, suggesting that stories like that of Joseph should be studied as polyvalent narratives open to layered meanings.

In the teaching and pedagogical domain, hermeneutic approaches to Surah Yūsuf have been noted for their value in cultivating ethical reasoning, narrative literacy, and interfaith dialogue (El Fadl, 2001). The story of Joseph, also found in Biblical and Rabbinic traditions, provides a comparative platform for dialogue between Qur'anic hermeneutics and broader Abrahamic narratives. Such comparative hermeneutics highlight both the shared motifs of betrayal, patience, and reconciliation, as well as the distinctive Qur'anic emphases on divine providence and moral exemplarity. Despite this growing body of literature, gaps remain in three areas: first, systematic application of hermeneutic frameworks (coherence, intertextuality, reflexivity) to a full surah; second, sustained dialogue between classical tafsir and modern interpretive questions without dismissing either; and third, developing a replicable model for readers and educators that demonstrates transparent method in dealing with Qur'anic narratives. This study positions itself at this intersection, aiming to provide a structured hermeneutic analysis of Surah Yūsuf that bridges tradition and modern interpretive needs.

Identified Gap

The review shows three gaps. First, classical tafsir provides detailed commentary but lacks focus on whole-story coherence. Second, modern literary studies explore form and style but often isolate narrative analysis from theological and ethical concerns. Third, hermeneutic theory offers tools for integrative interpretation but is underutilized in Qur'anic narrative studies, particularly for Surah Yūsuf. This study responds by applying critical hermeneutics to Surah Yūsuf as a complete narrative. It brings classical tafsir into structured dialogue with modern hermeneutics, showing how meaning emerges not only in single verses but across the arc of dream, trial, power, and reconciliation. In doing so, it contributes to Qur'anic studies by modelling a reflexive and textually grounded method that integrates linguistic precision, narrative design, and ethical application.

3. Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a **hermeneutic-qualitative research design** to explore the narrative and ethical dimensions of Surah Yūsuf. The focus lies on understanding how narrative structures—such as sequencing, repetition, characterization, and coherence—shape the moral and theological meanings of the chapter. Hermeneutics, in this context, is not only a method of interpretation but also a critical stance that situates the reader within a dialogue between text, tradition, and contemporary context (Palmer, 1969; Gadamer, 2004). By applying a critical hermeneutic framework, the study moves beyond descriptive commentary to examine **how meaning is produced, contested, and transmitted**. The research does not aim to provide definitive theological rulings but to demonstrate how Surah Yūsuf can be read as a narrative case study that negotiates human experience, divine providence, and ethical choices.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in **critical hermeneutics**, which combines the interpretive principles of classical hermeneutics with the reflexive awareness of modern critical theory. The framework draws from:

1. **Classical Islamic Tafsir Tradition:** Tafsir works of Ibn Kathīr, al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī, and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī serve as primary interlocutors. These exegetes provide theological, linguistic, and moral readings that anchor the surah within early interpretive traditions.
2. **Modern Hermeneutic Theory:** The works of Schleiermacher, Gadamer, and Ricoeur guide the analysis of textual coherence, intertextuality, and symbolic meaning.
3. **Narrative Hermeneutics:** Narrative theory is applied to examine character development, plot progression, and symbolic motifs such as betrayal, patience, and divine timing.

The theoretical framework therefore combines **Islamic interpretive authority** with **modern textual analysis** to create a layered understanding of Surah Yūsuf.

Data Sources

The study relies on three tiers of sources:

- **Primary Text:** The Qur'an, specifically Surah Yūsuf, using Arabic text with cross-references to established translations (Abdel Haleem, Pickthall, Yusuf Ali).
- **Classical Tafsir:** Authoritative commentaries (e.g., al-Ṭabarī's *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, Ibn Kathīr's *Tafsīr al-Qurān al-‘Azīm*, al-Qurṭubī's *al-Jāmi' li-Āhkām al-Qurān*).
- **Secondary Literature:** Modern academic works on hermeneutics, Qur'anic narrative studies, and critical theology (Neuwirth, Rahman, Arkoun).

Data Collection Procedures

The process of data collection follows textual-exegetical analysis:

- **Textual Segmentation:** The surah is divided into narrative units (dream sequences, betrayal by brothers, imprisonment, rise to power, reconciliation).
- **Thematic Coding:** Each unit is coded for dominant themes such as patience, betrayal, divine providence, forgiveness, and moral agency.
- **Comparative Tafsir Analysis:** Classical interpretations are reviewed to see how exegetes dealt with each narrative unit.
- **Hermeneutic Dialogue:** The researcher engages in a reflexive dialogue between classical interpretations and contemporary concerns, maintaining transparency in interpretive choices.

Analytical Strategy

The hermeneutic analysis is guided by three methodological lenses:

- **Coherence Testing:** Examining how narrative parts interconnect to form a unified ethical message.
- **Intertextual Reading:** Considering how Surah Yūsuf resonates with other Qur'anic passages on patience, divine providence, and human trials.
- **Narrative Ethics:** Identifying how the text's narrative elements invite readers to adopt specific virtues and moral orientations.

Through these lenses, the study demonstrates how hermeneutic reading can preserve fidelity to classical sources while generating relevant insights for contemporary readers.

Reflexivity and Researcher Position

Critical hermeneutics requires reflexivity. As a researcher, I acknowledge that my reading is shaped by my scholarly training, cultural background, and contemporary ethical concerns. While I draw upon classical tafsir to remain faithful to the Islamic scholarly tradition, I also engage modern interpretive theory to address present-day questions. This self-awareness is part of ensuring transparency and academic integrity.

Ethical Considerations

Interpretive work on sacred texts carries ethical responsibilities:

- **Respect for Tradition:** Classical interpretations are not dismissed but engaged critically with respect.
- **Avoidance of Doctrinal Absolutism:** The study does not claim theological finality but offers a perspective grounded in hermeneutic inquiry.
- **Academic Integrity:** Proper attribution of all sources ensures adherence to international research standards.

Limitations of the Method

This study acknowledges that hermeneutic interpretation is inherently subjective and context-dependent. The focus on narrative and ethics may overlook certain theological or jurisprudential dimensions of the surah. Additionally, the selection of classical tafsir texts, while representative, cannot cover the full spectrum of exegetical traditions.

4. Analysis and Findings

Prologue and first dream, Q 12:1–6

Textual cues. The surah opens by framing the Qur'an as clear Arabic speech and calls this account the best telling, then reports Yusuf's dream of eleven stars, the sun, and the moon bowing to him, with Yaqub warning him to keep it private (Q 12:3–6). The phrase *ahsan al-qasas* marks the narrative as teaching through form and placement, not as entertainment (Q 12:3, 12:111).

Classical tafsir. Al-Tabari and Ibn Kathir read the dream as prophecy of honor and eventual family reunion, while noting the risk of envy if disclosed openly (al-Tabari n.d.; Ibn Kathir 2003). Al-Qurtubi underlines the ethic of prudent speech in Yaqub's counsel (al-Qurtubi n.d.).

Hermeneutic reading. The dream is a narrative seed that sets up the end of the story. It also introduces *ta'wil*, the skill of unfolding signs over time. Hermeneutically, meaning is not instant. The text teaches delayed recognition and warns against premature public sharing when harm is likely. Ethically, two norms surface early: guard the trust of private talk, and accept that some signs mature in stages (Gadamer 2004; Ricoeur 1976).

Intertext fit. Hope and promise at the start echo the closure prayer in Q 12:101, keeping the arc tight from opening to end.

Envy, deception, and the well, Q 12:7–18

Textual cues. The brothers plot, drop Yusuf in a well, then bring a blood-stained shirt to their father, who answers with *sabr jamil*, beautiful patience, and trust in God's knowledge (Q 12:18).

Classical tafsir. Tafsir works note the shirt as false proof and Yaqub's refusal to let grief become despair (al-Tabari n.d.; Ibn Kathir 2003). They debate details of the wolf story and stress the moral fault of envy.

Hermeneutic reading. This unit shows how false evidence can look persuasive while truth rests in patient restraint. *Sabr jamil* is not passive. It is morally steady, refusing slander and hysteria while seeking facts. The ethical warning is clear: envy corrodes families and warps speech. The shirt becomes a motif of truth and falsehood that will return later as proof in the palace and as a sign of healing.

Intertext fit. The restraint modeled here aligns with wider Qur'anic counsel on patience and justice in speech (Q 16:125, Q 49:6).

Sale, displacement, and God's plan, Q 12:19–21

Textual cues. A caravan finds Yusuf, sells him for a small sum of counted coins, and he is bought in Egypt. The verse states that God prevails over His command, though most people do not know (Q 12:21).

Classical tafsir. Commentators discuss the low price and the buyer's words to his wife, reading the scene as humiliation under human power but also as an entry into a greater plan (al-Qurtubi n.d.; Ibn Kathir 2003).

Hermeneutic reading. The text neither glorifies the sale nor explains away the harm. It holds two truths together: human wrongdoing is real, and divine purpose is at work. Ethically, the scene flags commodification of a person as wrong while also teaching realistic hope. Coherence test: the line about God's plan anticipates later turns at the prison and the court.

Formation of character, wisdom, and trial, Q 12:22–29

Textual cues. When Yusuf reaches maturity, God grants him wisdom and knowledge (*hukm* and *ilm*), then comes the attempted seduction, the plea for refuge in God, the shirt torn from behind, and the witness who uses the shirt's direction as forensic evidence to clear Yusuf (Q 12:22–29).

Classical tafsir. Tafsir notes the meaning of *burhan* in Q 12:24, the decisive sign that halts sin. Exegetes offer views: a spiritual sign, a rational proof, or sudden awareness of God's watch (al-Tabari n.d.; al-Razi n.d.; Ibn Kathir 2003). They also highlight the shirt test as procedural reasoning.

Hermeneutic reading. Three ethical points stand out. First, restraint is learned and supported by insight given by God. Second, the shirt functions as material evidence; the text affirms reasoned procedure over rumor. Third, the narrative does not erase the woman's agency nor reduce the scene to a trope; it shows blame, then social pressure to contain scandal. Coherence test: the same motif of the shirt, false earlier, true here, ties truth claims to verifiable signs.

Intertext fit. Appeal to God against temptation and pressure resonates with wider Qur'anic calls to guard modesty and seek help through faith and patience (Q 24:30–31; Q 2:153).

Prison, teaching through service, and tawhid, Q 12:30–42

Textual cues. After gossip spreads, Yusuf is imprisoned. In prison, two men ask for dream interpretations. Yusuf first teaches tawhid and the limits of idol talk, then reads their dreams, asking one to mention him to the king, which is then forgotten for a time (Q 12:36–42).

Classical tafsir. Commentators emphasize Yusuf's da'wa sequence: establish God's oneness, then answer the request. They also discuss why he asked to be remembered and whether this delayed his release, citing reports with caution (Ibn Kathir 2003; al-Tabari n.d.).

Hermeneutic reading. The prison turns into a teaching space. The order matters: meaning of life before meaning of dreams. Ethically, the model is service under constraint. Coherence test: interpretation of dreams, promised at the start, now matures as social benefit, not self-promotion. The forgetfulness detail slows the plot to teach patience in service.

Intertext fit. The line in Q 12:40, judgment belongs to God alone, ties back to the surah's steady focus on lawful order and fair proof.

King's dream, economic foresight, and public trust, Q 12:43–57

Textual cues. The king dreams of cows and ears of grain. Yusuf interprets it as years of plenty followed by famine, then proposes a plan. He is appointed to manage storehouses, describing himself as hafiz, alim, trustworthy and knowledgeable (Q 12:55).

Classical tafsir. Tafsir details the plan as prudent saving and fair distribution. Some discuss the ethics of Yusuf's request for office: he asked to serve in a role matching his competence for public good (al-Qurtubi n.d.; Ibn Kathir 2003).

Hermeneutic reading. Interpretation here turns into policy. Knowledge must serve people. Ethics of governance surface: competence, trust, and clear planning. The text presents a leader accountable for food security and fair measures. Coherence test: the dream theme resolves into public welfare, showing that spiritual insight has social form.

Intertext fit. The pair of qualities, trust and knowledge, echo Qur'anic criteria for stewardship and justice elsewhere (Q 4:58; Q 28:26).

Tests of recognition, procedural justice, and the cup, Q 12:58–79

Textual cues. The brothers arrive, do not recognize Yusuf, and are tested. The cup is placed in the youngest brother's sack, and the law of the king would not allow his detention except by God's leave. Yusuf applies a rule that allows retention based on their own code so as not to wrong them (Q 12:76–79).

Classical tafsir. Exegetes debate the legal puzzle: how did Yusuf lawfully hold his brother. Many conclude he applied a known rule from their tradition to avoid injustice within Egyptian law, by God's permission (al-Tabari n.d.; al-Razi n.d.).

Hermeneutic reading. The scene is about procedural justice, not trickery for its own sake. The narrative insists on due process and using an accepted standard so that the outcome has moral weight. Coherence test: earlier forensics with the shirt prefigure this use of evidence and rule. Ethically, ends do not justify means unless the means are just on their own terms.

Intertext fit. The care for fair measures matches the concern for honest trade and law elsewhere in the Qur'an (Q 11:85; Q 55:7–9).

Grief, restraint, and hope, Q 12:80–87

Textual cues. One brother stays behind. Yaqub voices grief to God alone and urges his sons not to lose hope in God's relief, la tay'asu min rawh Allah (Q 12:86–87).

Classical tafsir. Tafsir treats this as a model of honest lament without complaint against God and as a proof that hope is binding even under loss (Ibn Kathir 2003).

Hermeneutic reading. The surah refuses to shame grief. It legitimizes deep sorrow while steering speech toward God rather than public collapse. Hope is not mood. It is a duty linked to continued search and effort. Coherence test: this hope anchors the move from famine to reunion.

Intertext fit. This aligns with broad Qur'anic teaching on mercy and return to God after mistakes (Q 39:53).

Recognition, pardon, and repair, Q 12:88–98

Textual cues. Yusuf reveals his identity, states that God favored them after hardship, and says: no blame on you today, may God forgive you, He is most merciful (la tathriba alaykum al-yawm), then sends his shirt that restores Yaqub's sight (Q 12:92–96).

Classical tafsir. Exegetes connect la tathriba to prophetic pardon, and discuss the shirt as a sign by God's will be linked to earlier shirt scenes, now turning from false proof to healing (al-Qurtubi n.d.; Ibn Kathir 2003).

Hermeneutic reading. The ethics of pardon complete the arc: the one with power chooses mercy without denial of harm. The shirt motif closes the truth-falsehood-healing sequence. Coherence test: motifs resolve, and virtues named earlier, sabr and taqwa, are confirmed as the path that led here (Q 12:90).

Intertext fit. Pardon sits squarely within Qur'anic calls to forgive when able, while still upholding justice in public life (Q 24:22; Q 42:40).

Fulfillment and final prayer, Q 12:99–101

Textual cues. Family prostration is framed as the fulfillment of the dream. Tafsir explains this as a greeting of Honor, not worship. Yusuf's closing prayer credits God for knowledge and authority and asks to die in full submission and be joined with the righteous (Q 12:100–101).

Classical tafsir. The prayer sums up the theology of the chapter: knowledge is gift, authority is a trust, and the end sought is a good death in faith (al-Tabari n.d.; Ibn Kathir 2003).

Hermeneutic reading. The ending teaches how to handle success: credit God, keep humility, and aim for a good end. Coherence test: the first dream closes, the prologue promise holds, and the narrative speaks beyond its time to readers who face power and recognition.

Core motifs that carry meaning

- **Dreams and ta'wil.** From Q 12:4 to Q 12:100–101, dreams move from sign to social welfare. Interpretation is service, not show.
- **The shirt.** Three appearances: fake blood for a lie, torn shirt for truth, then shirt that heals. The arc binds truth claims to evidence and grace.
- **Spaces of constraint.** Well, house, prison. Each space becomes a site of moral choice and teaching.
- **Speech ethics.** Secrets kept, lies exposed, measured public talk, and final words of pardon. Speech shifts outcomes.
- **Sabr and taqwa.** Named together as the path to the outcome, then verified by the resolution (Q 12:90).

These motifs are not ornaments. They are the wiring that carries ethical meaning across scenes (Mir 1986; Izutsu 2002).

Key lexical fields that shape ethics

- **Sabr.** Not passive waiting. It is active steadiness under harm, linked to action and policy later in the story (Q 12:18, 12:83, 12:90).
- **Taqwa.** God-conscious restraint, tied to turning away from sin and to fair use of power (Q 12:24, 12:90).
- **Ihsan.** Excellence in conduct. Granted to Yusuf with hukm and ilm, then shown in service and governance (Q 12:22, 12:56).
- **Burhan.** A decisive sign that halts sin. Tafsir varies on form, but the function is moral clarity at the edge of wrongdoing (Q 12:24; al-Razi n.d.; Ibn Kathir 2003).
- **Ta'wil al-ahadith.** Unfolding meanings of dreams and events over time. It matures into public policy, not private status (Q 12:6, 12:21, 12:100–101).

These fields match Izutsu's insight that Qur'anic ethics are carried by clusters of words and their relations, not by isolated definitions (Izutsu 2002).

Coherence and intertext tests

- **Start-end lock.** The promise of best telling and the first dream close cleanly in Q 12:100–101, satisfying narrative coherence (Q 12:3, 12:4, 12:100–101).
- **Evidence pattern.** False shirt vs torn shirt vs healing shirt builds a through-line from deceit to proof to grace.
- **Theology in practice.** Monotheism leads to fair process and public good: prison preaching of tawhid flows into just policy during famine (Q 12:40, 12:55–57).
- **Cross-Qur'an echoes.** Calls to pardon and hope line up with broader Qur'anic teaching on mercy and restraint (Q 24:22; Q 39:53).

These tests support the claim that meaning arises from the full arc, not from single verses alone (Ricoeur 1984; Mir 1986).

Dialogue with classical tafsir on key issues

Burhan in Q 12:24. Reports vary: a sign from God, an inner warning, or the face of Yaqub, among others. The exact form is not fixed by the verse. Function is clear: a decisive check that redirects action (al-Tabari n.d.; al-Razi n.d.; Ibn Kathir 2003). A cautious stance respects that the verse does not specify the sign while affirming its moral role.

Law and the cup, Q 12:76. Yusuf applies a rule aligned with the brothers' code, avoiding injustice under Egyptian procedure. Tafsir presents this as lawful ingenuity granted by God, not deceit for gain (al-Tabari n.d.; al-Qurtubi n.d.). The hermeneutic takeaway is due process that the other party recognizes.

Sujud of honor, Q 12:100. Classical works mark it as greeting, not worship, which protects the surah's strict monotheism (Ibn Kathir 2003). The narrative thus keeps worship for God while allowing social honor codes of that time.

This dialogue shows respect for tradition while clarifying where the text itself sets limits. It also keeps present-day readers from forcing the surah into debates it does not address.

Ethical synthesis for today

From the close reading, the following ethical themes are robust, text-tethered, and transferable:

- **Guard speech and timing.** Share sensitive news with care. Yaqub's counsel models prudence in family and public life (Q 12:5).
- **Refuse envy.** Envy drives violence and lies. Communities must check it early through fairness and honest talk (Q 12:8–18).
- **Use evidence.** Shirts are not random props. The text affirms forensics and procedure over rumour and rage (Q 12:26–28).
- **Hold the line under pressure.** Burhan shows that help to resist sin can be intellectual, spiritual, or both. Seek it and act on it (Q 12:24).
- **Turn skill into service.** Interpretation, planning, and data stewardship should feed people, not egos (Q 12:47–55).
- **Honor due process.** Outcomes must rest on accepted rules, not raw will, even when goals seem noble (Q 12:76–79).
- **Let grief speak to God.** Honest lament is allowed. Keep hope active, paired with search and effort (Q 12:86–87).
- **Pardon when able.** Forgiveness that names harm and then releases blame repairs bonds and resets futures (Q 12:92).
- **Handle success with care.** Credit God, stay humble, and ask for a good end (Q 12:100–101).

These themes are consistent with classical insights and pass coherence and intertext checks (al-Qurtubi n.d.; Ibn Kathir 2003; Gadamer 2004; Ricoeur 1984).

Limits of this Reading

The chapter has stayed with the Arabic text and core tafsir voices. It did not attempt historical reconstruction outside the Qur'an, nor did it extend into legal rulings beyond what the narrative presents. Where tafsir reports vary, the reading focused on function rather than unsupported detail. Claims are open to revision where stronger textual or lexical evidence is shown.

Chapter summary

Surah Yusuf teaches through a tight story arc. Dreams, shirts, spaces of constraint, and calibrated speech carry meaning forward. Classical tafsir preserves crucial insights on language and ethics. A critical hermeneutic reading shows how those insights hold together across the full chapter and remain relevant for readers now. The next chapter will bring these findings together and state the study's implications for teaching, public ethics, and future work.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Restating the Aim of the Study

This research aimed to conduct a hermeneutic analysis of Surah Yūsuf, focusing on how its narrative features convey layers of ethical and spiritual meaning. The analysis sought to evaluate the chapter's coherence as a unified story, its intertextual fit within the Qur'anic discourse, and the role of classical tafsīr in framing modern interpretive possibilities. By combining textual analysis, hermeneutic methodology, and dialogical engagement with exegetical traditions, the study attempted to highlight how the narrative of Prophet Yūsuf operates as both a story and a moral-theological framework for readers across time.

Key Findings of the Study

✓ Narrative Coherence and Unity

The study found that Surah Yūsuf possesses remarkable internal coherence, structured through recurring motifs such as dreams, betrayal, patience, and divine providence. These motifs function as thematic anchors that hold the narrative together from beginning to end. Unlike fragmented prophetic episodes in other Qur'anic surahs, Surah Yūsuf presents a complete story that develops sequentially. This literary unity, often emphasized in classical tafsīr (e.g., al-Tabarī, Ibn Kathīr), reinforces the surah's claim of being "the best of stories" (Qur'an 12:3).

✓ Ethical and Theological Meaning

The narrative communicates profound ethical lessons on forgiveness, chastity, patience in adversity, and the dangers of jealousy. Hermeneutic interpretation revealed how these lessons are not abstract but embedded in the lived experiences of Prophet Yūsuf and other characters. For example, Yūsuf's resistance to seduction by the wife of al-Azīz illustrates

moral agency under social pressure, while his eventual forgiveness of his brothers demonstrates a Qur'anic ethic of reconciliation. These lessons are coherent with wider Qur'anic teachings on *ṣabr* (patience) and *tawakkul* (trust in God).

✓ Intertextual Fit within the Qur'an

Comparative analysis showed how Surah Yūsuf interlocks with other Qur'anic narratives. While Surah Yūsuf provides the fullest account of Joseph's life, scattered references in Surah al-An'ām (6:84), Surah Ghāfir (40:34), and Surah al-Saffāt (37:101-107) affirm its theological significance. The hermeneutic framework highlighted how the story reinforces broader Qur'anic themes of divine providence, human fallibility, and the ultimate triumph of truth. This intertextuality ensures that the surah is not read in isolation but as part of the Qur'an's cohesive moral vision.

✓ Dialogue with Classical Tafsīr

Engaging classical *tafsīr* revealed that early scholars emphasized both historical detail and moral application. For instance, al-Qurṭubī focused on legal and ethical derivations from Yūsuf's trials, while Ibn Kathīr underscored the divine wisdom behind his imprisonment. This research demonstrated how modern hermeneutic analysis can honor these classical insights while addressing contemporary concerns such as gender ethics, power dynamics, and resilience in modern social contexts. Thus, the study modeled a reflexive and respectful dialogue between tradition and modern inquiry.

✓ Methodological Transparency

The study emphasized reflexivity and transparent hermeneutics, ensuring that interpretation was grounded in textual analysis rather than subjective speculation. By laying out clear steps—textual coherence, intertextual comparison, *tafsīr* dialogue, and ethical reflection—the research established a replicable method for analyzing other narrative surahs. This contributes to methodological development in Qur'anic studies, particularly in contexts that seek to bridge traditional *tafsīr* with modern interpretive theory.

Implications of the Findings

✓ For Qur'anic Scholarship

The research demonstrates the potential of hermeneutics to enrich Qur'anic studies by integrating literary sensitivity, historical awareness, and ethical interpretation. It shows that Qur'anic narratives can be studied with the same rigor applied to other literary texts, without diminishing their sacred status.

✓ For Ethical Discourse

The ethical lessons of Surah Yūsuf remain relevant for contemporary contexts. In a world marked by family conflicts, moral dilemmas, and struggles with power and injustice, the story provides timeless guidance. The emphasis on patience, moral agency, and forgiveness highlights the Qur'an's capacity to address universal human concerns.

✓ For Pedagogy and Teaching

The structured hermeneutic method offers a teaching model for educators in Islamic Studies and Comparative Religion. Teachers can guide students in analyzing Qur'anic narratives not only for their theological content but also for their narrative structure and ethical implications. This approach makes the Qur'an more accessible to learners while maintaining scholarly rigor.

✓ Limitations of the Study

While the study provided a detailed analysis, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, it primarily focused on Surah Yūsuf in isolation, with only limited comparative engagement with Biblical and Jewish traditions of Joseph. A fuller comparative hermeneutic study could deepen interfaith understanding. Second, the emphasis was on textual and ethical dimensions, leaving less room for exploring the surah's reception history in different Muslim cultures. Lastly, the study was conducted in the framework of academic hermeneutics, which may differ from devotional readings practiced in Muslim communities.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies could expand in several directions:

- Comparative hermeneutics between Qur'anic and Biblical accounts of Joseph.
- Reception studies exploring how Surah Yūsuf has been interpreted in poetry, Sufi mysticism, and cultural traditions.
- Gender-focused readings examining the portrayal of women in the narrative, such as the wife of al-'Azīz and the women of Egypt.
- Application of modern narrative theory and discourse analysis to Qur'anic stories for broader literary-theological insights.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research showed that Surah Yūsuf stands as a unique narrative in the Qur'an, combining literary coherence, theological depth, and ethical instruction. Through hermeneutic analysis, the surah emerges not only as a

story of a prophet but as a timeless case study in human resilience, divine providence, and moral responsibility. Its dialogue with classical *tafsīr* affirms continuity with tradition, while its relevance to modern ethical and social concerns demonstrates the Qur'an's enduring significance.

By highlighting method, reflexivity, and respect for tradition, this study provides a framework that future scholars, educators, and students can apply to other Qur'anic narratives. Surah Yūsuf thus remains both a story of the past and a living source of wisdom for the present.

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