



Joseph

*in the
Three Monotheistic Faiths*

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PASSIA
Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs

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Contents

Foreword

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi 1

The Story of Joseph: A Jewish Perspective

Rabbi Jeremy Milgrom 3

The Story of Joseph: A Christian Perspective - The Rereading of the Joseph Story by Christian Authors

Rev. Dr. David M. Neuhaus SJ 9

Joseph in the Qur'an: Glimpses from the Story of a Prophet

Dr. Ibrahim Abu Salem 21

Selected Bibliography

Further Reading Sources in English 63

Foreword

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi

Head of PASSIA, Jerusalem

Religion has always been one of the major factors responsible for shaping people's lives, especially in the Middle East, and many people now consider religious dialogue a modern tool for examining and understanding people's attitudes, perceptions and judgments. In recent years, researchers and professionals in academic circles have undoubtedly become increasingly interested in investigating even further the various aspects of religion, especially the revival or religiosity witnessed amongst different communities and the ways in which religion in general, and this revival in particular, affect the stands they adopt in response to certain crises.

In attempting to understand holy texts such as the Old Testament, the Bible, and the Qur'an, people generally turn to a whole range of interpretations, which together, form a religious culture. This religious culture, which determines the way in which individuals relate to the past as well as the future, is based amongst other things on acceptance of the idea that people should live their lives according to a given set of moral values and acknowledge this set of values as a system capable of governing society. Whether one's understanding of the holy texts of one's religion is the result of casually gleaned knowledge or else of many years spent engaged in serious discussion of their context and significance, the fact remains that in most cases, it is religious culture, more than anything else, that determines the way in which an individual lives his/her life.

In order to understand where religion is about to lead societies, it is vitally important that dialogue forums continue. The story of Joseph (Peace be upon him) highlights a number of angles that enrich religious dialogue, not least of all because it helps in fostering understanding of the interrelations between religion, history and legend. It comes as no surprise to those who have studied it in some detail that in the Holy Qur'an, God refers to it as "the best of stories".

Reading the three monotheistic holy texts, we learn that Joseph's personality was formed by five major episodes in his life. The first episode involves the unique, intimate relation that Joseph shared with his father, and reflects, the extent to which most individuals are attached to their roots, heritage, family, history, and identity.

Joseph

The second episode, meanwhile, relates to Joseph's relationship with his brothers, who were so jealous of the extremely close relationship that developed between son and father that their jealousy and anger resulted in their plotting against the former and deceiving the latter. Yet, with God's help, Joseph was saved. We can say, therefore, that this particular episode is concerned with the relationship between the individual and his or her destiny.

As to the third episode, it relates to Joseph's relationship with the wife of the ruler of Egypt, who was intent on seducing Joseph, and who therefore symbolizes the tendency of so many to go after what they want, regardless of the legality or morality of their actions, believing, misguidedly of course, that "the end justifies the means." The behavior of Joseph, on the other hand, represents one's ability to resist personal desires and impulses and accept the consequences, which in Joseph's case, was imprisonment.

With regard to the fourth episode, it relates to the way in which Joseph's life was transformed (from the well to the palace of the ruler of Egypt, from being imprisoned to playing a leading role in shaping politics). It also provides us with a perfect example of the need for modesty, compassion and forgiveness; Joseph was eventually granted authority, which he undoubtedly enjoyed, yet he remained modest, acknowledged his past and acted justly toward those who had sought to harm him, including his brothers, with whom he willingly shared his prosperity.

Coming to the last episode responsible for shaping Joseph's character, we find that it involves his remarkable ability to interpret visions and dreams. It therefore represents the striving on the part of individuals and communities to analyze and understand the deeper meanings of the variables surrounding them, as well as their desire to prepare for the future.

To discuss the story of Joseph in the context of the perspectives of the three monotheistic faiths is to learn about different interpretations of the same text, share its value and beauty, and fully understand God's message that this is "the best of stories." The fact that the three views were presented at a PASSIA meeting in the midst of a serious conflict shows that even when circumstances are less than ideal, religious dialogue is still possible. It also shows that there are still those who believe, with good reason, that in order to overcome crises, we need to focus not on our differences, but on the things that unite us.

PASSIA's Religious Studies Unit remains committed to promoting and facilitating the reading and understanding of holy texts, encouraging scholars and religious figures to explore their skills and knowledge, and working toward creating an environment characterized by better understanding, be it between private individuals, public figures, or entire communities.

The Story of Joseph: A Jewish Perspective

Rabbi Jeremy Milgrom

Jerusalem

It is very good to be sitting around this seminar table with learned Christian and Muslim colleagues to discuss the story of Joseph. Yet, this is hardly an esoteric subject - even the person in the street, be it a street with Muslim, Christian or Jewish inhabitants, is acquainted with the topic of our meeting. As I am not a Biblical scholar but a pastor principally interested in the promotion of peace and justice with the help of the religious dimension in the lives of people, my aim in this presentation will be to share with you how your Jewish neighbors might read the Joseph story, and thereby to provide a wider basis of understanding based on a compelling universal story.

Do Jews consider the Joseph story to be religious literature?

The story of Joseph runs for 14 chapters in the book of Genesis, from chapter 37-50,¹ making it, along with the stories of David, Samuel and

¹ With only a single “break in the action, with the story of Judah and Tamar in chapter 38, which has literary connections to the main story – the motif of *haker na* – the false appearance motif that begins with Isaac not recognizing Jacob who is standing in for Esau, continues with Jacob not recognizing his wife on their wedding day, carries on with Jacob being tricked with Joseph’s torn garment, Judah being tricked by Tamar, and Joseph not disclosing his identity to his brothers; there is also a literary break in chapter 46 for a genealogical update.

Saul, one of the longest stories in the Bible. Yet, one may ask, in what way is this story relevant to an observant Jew's ritual life? Are there any reenactments of the story or holidays² that recall its drama? The answer is no. One could say that the question is out of place, since the entire book of Genesis is narrative and is hardly used in a practical way in the oral tradition (*Torah sheb'al peh*). Yet, the Joseph story is much different than the rest of Genesis, where the main characters - Adam, Noah, Abr(ah)am, Isaac and Jacob - as well many of the minor ones, such as Eve, Cain, Abel, Enoch, Sara(h), Hagar, Ishmael, Avimelech, Abraham's servant and Rebecca all interact with God. Joseph does not speak **with** God, like a prophet, but rather **about** God,³ and even that relatively sparsely.

One must conclude that according to the Bible, except for the story of his chastity in the face of temptation,⁴ Joseph cannot be considered a religious hero in any conventional sense. Yet he provides for the family-soon-to-be-nation,⁵ and thus, as the archetypal redeemer⁶ figure, he becomes a saintly⁷ character in rabbinic literature.

² The only holiday in which there is even a passing reference to Joseph is Sukkot (Tabernacles), when Joseph is listed along with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron and David as symbolic guests in the *Sukkah*; the Passover *Hagaddah*, which retells the story of the Exodus from Egypt, mentions neither Joseph nor, more surprisingly, Moses.

³ And sometimes in ironic, almost cynical ways (cf. Gen. 43: 29, where he wishes Benjamin God's blessing just before he puts him into great peril by hiding the silver goblet in his baggage).

⁴ Which the text attributes to his fear of God (Gen. 39: 9).

⁵ It is in this context that we find Joseph most convincingly invoke God's name three times in the space of five verses (Gen. 45: 5-9).

⁶ So much so that in Jewish apocalyptic literature, one of the two (!) messiahs who will come at the end of days will be a descendant of Joseph.

⁷ Aficionados of rabbinic literature will feel comfortable with Islamic tradition where this tendency to smooth off the rough edges of biblical characters leaves no trace of sin in essentially political figures who are revered as religious role models and considered to be prophets.

It should be pointed out that many Jews in Israel are almost completely unfamiliar with rabbinic literature, and rather unappreciative of it (thus the image of Joseph that we would pick up on the street would depend very much on the Israeli neighborhood we choose to walk down!). Furthermore, allow me to mention, since not everyone at this table follows the cultural discourse in Israel, that the historicity of the Bible is fiercely debated currently, and during all of the last century,⁸ so that for many, Joseph is a literary figure, but not a historical one, and perhaps not one worthy of emulation.

Since the story of Joseph is primarily a family story with national ramifications, we might take a close look at the relations between Joseph and his immediate family, primarily between Joseph and Jacob,⁹ and Joseph and his brothers:

When he finally discloses his identity and is reunited with his brothers, Joseph tries to give the entire saga some purpose and relieve his brothers' guilt for selling him into slavery by saying that God willed his descent into Egypt. But it is very hard to see Joseph's behavior towards his family as exemplary: he allows his father, whom he ostensibly¹⁰ loves so much, to languish in mourning for him for many years, and the abuse to which he subjects his brothers seems much more like revenge for what Joseph himself endured than anything even approaching God's providence.

⁸ Cf. Ahad Ha'am's famous essay on Moses, written at the very beginning of the 20th century, in which he claims that whether Moses actually ever existed and did what the Bible tells us he did is less important than the fact that the tradition has become central to Jewish identity.

⁹ According to the Bible (Genesis 35: 16-20), Joseph's mother, Rachel, died while giving birth to his brother Benjamin, presumably when Joseph was still in infancy, yet Joseph's second dream finds his mother, symbolized by the moon, bowing down to him (Genesis 37: 9-10), which indicates that he has "unfinished business" with her.

¹⁰ While one might see the reunion of Jacob and Joseph as the most pivotal element in the entire story, and especially as the desired result of Joseph's manipulation of the brothers, the name of his first son, Manasseh, is derived from the statement "God has made me forget all my troubles, that is, everyone my father's house (Genesis 41: 51)"!

Many Israeli readers will thus see Joseph not as an exemplary figure, but rather a troubled individual who is struggling with his past as a pampered child and an unloved, abused brother. They might see Joseph toying with his brothers not so much in order to prove that they have recognized their guilt and have become unconditionally loyal to a brother – thus another aspect of Joseph the righteous – but rather as his subconsciously maneuvering his brothers into the same situation of the potential abandonment of a younger brother, son of Rachel. It is as if Joseph is creating a psychodramatic reenactment so that he would find it psychologically safe to return to the same family setting as he left it, but this time assured that his brothers won't repeat their behavior.

Here, however, Joseph realizes the limits of his power, for with all his material and political status, he cannot bring his brothers or even his father to trust him. To the end,¹¹ they fear him rather than love him, and have to fabricate their father's final testament,¹² while Jacob has to entreat¹³ Joseph and bind to an oath¹⁴ in order to have confidence that his last wishes will be carried out.

Not only on the family level is the happy end of the story more tragic than it seems at first; so, too, on the national level, the deliverance that Joseph brings Egypt and his family will soon sour. The quasi slavery¹⁵ and

¹¹ Genesis 50: 15 ff.; the opening word of that verse *vayir'u* has a double meaning, "they saw/they feared concerning the death of their father Jacob."

¹² Yet another literary link to, and chastisement of, Jacob's deceiving Isaac (Genesis chapter 27), an act for which Jacob is punished even after his death.

¹³ Note the formulaic, "If I have found favor in your eyes (Genesis 47: 31)".

¹⁴ Genesis 47: 29-31.

¹⁵ Genesis 47: 19,25. The people plead for slavery, a chant which will be echoed by the Israelites when they lose faith during the years of wandering in the desert and choose the sheltered nature of servitude over the hardships of the liberation struggle (Exodus 5: 21; 14: 12; 17: 3, etc.). Is it actual slavery? Joseph is uncharacteristically wordless, and doesn't act on their request, as if to indicate that without doing anything more, he has virtually subjected them to the fate he himself endured in Egypt before his rise to power.

permanent economic oppression¹⁶ to which Joseph reduces the entire Egyptian people will become Israel's fate, just as soon as a Pharaoh “who knew not Joseph”¹⁷ arrives and turns the tables¹⁸ on the favored Israelites. The text that describes the stages of impoverishment of the Egyptians parallels perfectly the stages of poverty described negatively in Leviticus 25,¹⁹ where it decrees²⁰ that the Israelites are not to be sold into slavery – they are rather God's slaves, and God's slaves only. The text of the Joseph story might be seen then as a universalizing text that raises the status of all people to that of the chosen people – we are all God's people, and no economic solution that abuses anyone can be considered God's will.

How many Israeli readers universalize the story? How many of them are capable of seeing the slavery around them in which both the dominated and the dominating are trapped in an unhealthy cycle of fear? Currently there may not be many, but it is my firm conviction that the power of good literature, and for me, that is what the Bible is, first and foremost, to bring out universal, eternal truths and bring us together into enlightenment and a better future should never be underestimated.

¹⁶ Genesis 47: 26.

¹⁷ Exodus 1: 8.

¹⁸ The *Ele Ezkera* poem in the Yom Kippur suggests that the martyrdom of the ten rabbis executed in the Hadrianic persecution during Roman times is retribution for the sale of Joseph into slavery, but this theme, going as far as theodicy for the exile itself (Genesis 47: 21), is subtly introduced two millennia earlier.

¹⁹ My father, Jacob Milgrom, expanded orally on what he wrote in his commentary on Leviticus (Anchor Bible, Doubleday) vol. 3, page 2192.

²⁰ Leviticus 25: 42, 55.

Joseph

for the coming of Jesus Christ in the sacred history of salvation. Late apocryphal Jewish (pre-Christian) literature had already developed the figure of Joseph as an example of the suffering of the innocent just one and a text like the one in *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* makes the Christian assimilation of the model of Joseph to that of Jesus more comprehensible:

My brothers hated me but the Lord loved me. They wanted to kill me but the God of my fathers preserved me. Into a cistern they lowered me, the most High raised me up. They sold me into slavery, the Lord of all set me free. I was taken into captivity, the strength of His hand set me free. I was overtaken by hunger, the Lord Himself fed me generously. I was alone and God came to help me. I was in weakness and the Lord showed His concern for me. I was in prison and the Savior acted graciously on my behalf. I was in bonds and He loosed me. Falsely accused, and He testified on my behalf. Assaulted by bitter words of the Egyptians, and He rescued me. A slave, and He exalted me (Testament of Joseph 1:4-7)

Some have suggested that this text has certain later Christian interpolations.

In the New Testament, the story of Joseph is most explicitly presented in the writing of St Luke. In chapter 7 of the Acts of the Apostles, Luke presents the long speech of Stephen before his death by stoning, a death that is almost identical with that of Jesus' own death by crucifixion. Stephen says to his audience of Jews:

The patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him, and rescued him out of all his afflictions, and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him governor over Egypt and over all his household. Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan and great affliction and our fathers could find no food. But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent forth our fathers the first time. And at the second visit

Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh. And Joseph sent and called to him Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five souls (Ac 7:9-14).

Interestingly, in this long passage the explicit christological reading of the Joseph story is not emphasized. However, a theme that is very important in the christological reading, the theme of jealousy, is the framework for the entire story. In fact, the term "jealous" in Acts 7:9 is used three other times in Acts, always describing the jealousy of the opponents of the disciples as regards the success the disciples have in gathering around them many people who come to believe in Jesus (see Ac 5:17, 13:45, 17:5).

The only other explicit mention of Joseph in the New Testament is in the Letter to the Hebrews where Joseph is mentioned in the illustrious list of ancestors who have had faith:

By faith, Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his burial (Hb 11:22).

I will now seek to examine certain themes in the Joseph story that provide the hermeneutic framework for understanding the story of Jesus in the New Testament and early Church writings.

1. Jealousy and Betrayal

Undoubtedly the major theme in the Joseph story that is identified by the Christian writers is the one of jealousy and betrayal (as we have already seen in Acts). The christological reading of the story emphasizes the thematic of: one among many brothers, rejected by his brothers, and yet saved by God. Jesus, like Joseph before him, was condemned by his brothers and yet God raised him up to be the judge of his brothers.

Joseph

This theme is implicitly evoked in the parable of the murderous tenants in the vineyard. This parable is repeated in all three synoptic gospels and is an important key to understanding how Jesus' rejection and death is to be understood (see Mt 21:33-46, Mk 12:1-11, Lk 20:9-19). The evil doing tenants plot and kill the son of the vineyard owner, saying "This is the heir; **come let us kill him** and the inheritance will be ours" (Mt 21:38, Mk 12:7, Lk 20:14). The words of the tenants are an exact echo of the words of Joseph's brothers as they plot to kill Joseph: "**Come, let us kill him** and throw him in the well".

The *First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians*, a very early Christian writing, focuses on the component of jealousy in the history of sin. The writer's reflection begins with the jealousy of Cain for Abel (another important precursor of Christ in the christological understanding of the Old Testament, another innocent killed because of jealousy). The same jealousy is mentioned with regard to Joseph:

Jealousy made Joseph be persecuted until death and to come into bondage (ch. 4).

Tertulian (145-220), the important Latin Church Father, made explicit the christological reading in his *Answer to the Jews*, adding the element of betrayal to that of jealousy:

Joseph himself was made a figure of Christ in this point alone, that he suffered persecution at the hands of his brethren, and was sold into Egypt on account of the favor of God. Likewise, Christ was sold by Israel according to the flesh, by his brethren, when he is betrayed by Judas (7, 10).

One of the most developed patristic parallelisms concerning Jesus and Joseph is in the *Treatises* of Aphraat the Persian, a Father of the Syriac tradition. In his *Treatise on Persecution*, he states clearly:

Joseph persecuted is the image of Jesus persecuted (21,9).

He follows this up with no less than eighteen parallels between Joseph and Jesus in order to drive the christological reading home. Joseph in fact is the first of twelve such Old Testament parallels on the same theme of persecution (the other parallels being with Moses, Joshua, Jephthah, David, Elijah, Hezekiah, Josiah, Daniel, Hananiah and his brothers and Mordechai). However the parallel with Joseph is the most developed. These parallels include:

1. Joseph, his father dressed him in a tunic of many colors; Jesus, his Father dressed him in a body taken from a virgin.
2. Joseph, his father loved him more than his brothers; Jesus is the beloved and preferred one of His Father.
3. Joseph had visions and dreams; Jesus fulfilled visions and the prophets.
4. Joseph was a pastor with his brothers; Jesus is the chief pastor.
5. Joseph, when his father sent him to visit his brothers, they saw him and planned to kill him; Jesus, when his Father sent him to visit his brothers, they said, "This is the heir, come, let us kill him."
6. Joseph, his brothers threw him into a cistern; Jesus, his brothers made him descend among the dead.
7. Joseph ascended from the cistern; Jesus ascended from the dead.
8. Joseph, after he ascended from the cistern, received power over his brothers; Jesus, after his resurrection from among the dead was given a great and excellent name by his Father so that his brothers were submitted to him and his adversaries were placed under his feet.
9. Joseph, having revealed himself to his brothers, they were ashamed, trembled and were amazed by his greatness; Jesus, when he comes at the end of time to be revealed in his greatness, his brothers, who crucified him, will be ashamed, will tremble and will be terrified before him.

Joseph

10. For Joseph was sold into Egypt on the advice of Judah; and Jesus was handed over to the Jews by the hand of Judas Iscariot.
11. Joseph did not utter a word to his brothers when they sold him; Jesus did not utter a word to the judges when they judged him.
12. Joseph was unjustly handed over to prison; Jesus was unjustly condemned by the sons of his people.
13. Joseph gave up his two garments, one to his brothers and the other to the wife of his master; Jesus gave up his garment to the soldiers and they divided them.
14. Joseph, at the age of 30 years presented himself before the Pharaoh and became master of Egypt; Jesus, at the age of 30 years, came to the Jordan to be baptized, received the Spirit and went out to preach.
15. Joseph gave bread to the Egyptians; Jesus gave bread to the entire world.
16. Joseph took to himself a wife who was the daughter of an impious and idolatrous priest; Jesus took to himself the Church from impure peoples.
17. Joseph died and was buried in Egypt; Jesus died and was buried in Jerusalem.
18. Joseph, his brothers brought up his bones from Egypt; Jesus, his Father resurrected him from the dead and brought his body up to Him, incorruptible, into heaven (21.9).

A similar development of parallelisms, which also uses the Hebrew place names in the Old Testament Joseph story, is to be found in the *Sermon LXXXIX* of Caesar of Arles (a 6th century Church Father).

2. False Witness

A closely connected theme to the one of jealousy in the Joseph story is the theme of false witness. Aphraat mentions this in his 12th parallelism. Although it is not his brothers who bear false witness against Joseph as is the case with Jesus, Joseph is indeed victim of the false witness borne against him by the wife of Potiphar. Accused of sexual impropriety, Joseph is pure in thought and deed and yet falsely accused. Accused not of sexual but rather of religious and political impropriety, Jesus too is falsely accused. In both stories the role played by the false witnesses is an important narrative element. The wife of Potiphar bears false witness against Joseph both before the members of her household (Gn 39:14-15) and before her husband (39:16-19). Jesus too was the object of false witnesses both before the Sanhedrin (Mt 26:60-62, Mk 14:55-59) and before Pilate (Mt 27:12-14, Mk 15:3-5). Caesar of Arles explains this in his *Sermon XCII*:

Because of the plotting and accusation of the wife of his master, Joseph was sent to prison, like Christ who was crucified because of the plotting and the accusations of his enemies, and he deigned to descend into Hell like into a prison (XCII, 5).

3. Salvation and Empowerment

Cast into prison, Joseph is nonetheless redeemed by God. Likewise, Jesus cast into prison, killed and entombed in the realm of death, will be liberated from the chains of death by God in the event of his resurrection.

Joseph's emergence from prison and empowerment by Pharaoh also echo in Jesus' emergence from his passion and death into the fullness of new life in the resurrection. Here too we can find implicit links in the two Biblical narratives. In Gn 40:14, it is Joseph who asks the imprisoned chief cup bearer not to forget him when he is released and reinstated at court. Joseph says to him: "Be sure to **remember me** when things go well

Joseph

for you.” In the same words, the penitent thief, crucified alongside Jesus, says to Jesus, recognizing the injustice of Jesus’ own punishment: “**Remember me** when you come into your kingdom” (Lk 23:42). Both Joseph and Jesus will emerge from darkness into light.

The disciples do not believe that Jesus is alive, resurrected from the dead, when the women announce this news to them on the Sunday after his death: “But these words seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them” (Lk 24:11). Likewise, Jacob is stunned and unbelieving when his sons announce to him that Joseph is alive: “But he was as one stunned for he did not believe them” (Gn 45:26). When Jacob does finally see Joseph alive he is ready to die and exclaims, “Now I can die, now that I have seen you again, and seen you still alive” (Gn 46:30). These words are echoed by Simeon the Elder, awaiting the Messiah in the Temple. When he finally perceives Jesus, recognizing him as the long awaited Messiah, he takes him from his mothers into his own arms who exclaims, “Lord, let your servant now depart in peace according to your word. My eyes have seen your salvation” (Lk 2:29-30).

Also striking is the fact pointed out by Aphraat that Jesus was 30 years old (Lk 3:23) when he began his public life and Joseph was 30 years old when he was empowered by Pharaoh (Gn 41:46). This parallelism is noted also by Origen in his *Homilies on Genesis* (II,5). The confidence that the two figures inspire is also underlined in both narratives. When the famine arrives and the grain runs out in Egypt, Pharaoh tells the Egyptians: “Go to Joseph and **do** whatever he tells **you**” (Gn 41:55). Likewise, Mary tells the servants to do what Jesus tells them to do when the wine has run out at the marriage feast in Cana: “**Do** whatever he tells **you**” (Jn 2:5).

4. Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Another dominant theme in the Joseph story is that of forgiveness and the final reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers. This too is echoed in

the Jesus story. Interestingly, Aphraat does not mention this in his parallelism but Caesar of Arles does, in his *Sermon XC*:

He embraced them one by one and shed tears over each one of them. Watering the neck of each one of them, who feared him, he washed away the hate of his brothers by the tears of his love (XL, 4).

Joseph's dramatic revelation of his true identity to his brothers and their reconciliation is the dramatic peak of the Biblical story (Gn 45:1-15). No less surprising, the crucified Jesus on the cross says, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34). The model of mutual reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers remains eschatological for the reconciliation of Jesus with his brothers, those who have rejected him. This is what Paul explains to the Gentiles regarding those among the Jews who have not believed in Jesus. "For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree" (Rm 11:24).

II. JOSEPH AND JOSEPH

The Church Fathers restricted their focus to the parallels between Old Testament figures and Jesus, underlining how the persons of the Old Testament prepared for the coming of Jesus in the New Testament. However, modern literary analysis provides other possibilities for understanding more implicit re-readings of the Old Testament stories in the New.

I believe that at least for the Gospel of Matthew there is another formative reading of the Joseph story. Matthew's portrayal of Joseph, the spouse of Mary, is intricately modeled on the figure of Joseph in the Old Testament. I think that one may indeed dare to suggest that the Joseph of the New Testament, pure and holy fiancé of Mary, mother of Jesus Christ, was named for his predecessor Joseph in the Old. It is interesting to note that

III. JOSEPH AND THE CHRISTIAN BELIEVER

In conclusion, the virtues of Joseph are those that should also be practiced by the Christian. One can find many references to this in Christian literature, for instance in *Sermon XCII*, of Caesar of Arles:

Let us imitate blessed Joseph in perfect love and concern for chastity, refusing to return evil for evil to our enemies (XCII, 6).

However, an extraordinarily beautiful example can be found in *Sermon XCI* of the same author:

That which Joseph accomplished with regard to his brothers, is that which we also should realize in relation to those who sin against us. It is not they but their sins we should detest, having the will to reprimand them according to the measure of their fault ... and pardoning those who sin against us so that God will also pardon us all the times we sin against Him (XCI, 7).

Joseph in the Qur'an: Glimpses from the Story of a Prophet¹

Dr. Ibrahim Abu Salem

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*Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds. O our Lord,
Thou we praise many times as befits Thy Glory. Peace
be upon Prophet Muhammad, his sanctified family, his
virtuous companions and those who follow them until
the Day of Judgment.*

When I was invited to deliver a lecture titled 'Joseph (Peace be upon him) in the Qur'an' I at first found it exceptionally hard to envisage myself actually delivering such a lecture. I was distracted, and my heart was preoccupied with the suffering of the Palestinian people during Al-Aqsa Intifada, which erupted in response to the Israeli occupation. The prevailing cruel conditions did not encourage me to engage in research, and to be able to concentrate on anything other than the deteriorating situation was almost unthinkable. Yet, because the invitation came from such a dear brother, I found myself simply unable to say no.

I knew that covering the chapter of the Qur'an dealing with Joseph (Peace be upon him) in its entirety would not be possible in a single lecture; the fact that one author wrote more than 1,500 pages about the story of Jo-

¹ Translated from the Arabic original by Dr. Mustafa Abu Sway, Associate Professor of Philosophy and Islamic Studies at Al-Quds University, Jerusalem.

seph will help you to understand why. I decided, therefore, that I would focus on three different lessons from the story of Joseph: the first relating to Joseph's story with his brothers, the second to his captivity and imprisonment, and the third to his role as an official.

There is more than one chapter, or *Sura*, in the Qur'an that carries the name of a prophet; other chapters include those carrying the names of Abraham, Jonah, Noah and Muhammad (Peace be upon them). However, the actual contents of these chapters include very little in terms of the story of the prophets after which they were named. A good example is the chapter named after Jonah: out of 109 verses, only one - verse 98 - actually mentions him. The *Sura* of Joseph, on the other hand, is almost totally dedicated to the story of Joseph (Peace be upon him), from the beginning and until verse 101.

In other words, no chapter in the Qur'an provides details about the life of a prophet like this one does. This could possibly be the reason why the story of Joseph (Peace be upon him) is described in the chapter carrying his name as the "most beautiful of stories": "We do relate unto thee the most beautiful of stories, in that We reveal to thee this [portion of the] Qur'an." Qur'an, 12:3

The story of Joseph (Peace be upon him) is also mentioned in what is commonly known as the Old Testament - the Torah -, which is a part of the Holy Bible. I had the opportunity to read the biblical story whilst engaging in a comparative study, only to find that there are 50 differences between the story in the Bible and the one in the Qur'an. Also interesting is the fact that when I taught a course titled 'The Qur'anic Stories' at Al-Quds University, it took me the whole course to teach this particular story.

I. JOSEPH'S RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS FATHER AND BROTHERS

The events began with a vision that Joseph (Peace be upon him) experienced and subsequently shared with his father, and ends with Joseph and his family being reunited in Egypt. In the Qur'an, the beginning of the story goes as follows:

“Behold, Joseph said to his father: ‘O my father! I did see eleven stars and the sun and the moon: I saw them prostrate themselves to me!’” Qur'an, 12:4

The *Sura* of Joseph is unique because it not only devotes so much attention to the actual story of Joseph (Peace be upon him), but also contains references to several different visions and dreams. The above is the first vision mentioned. The second and the third visions were experienced by Joseph's companions in prison, and the fourth by the King of Egypt. Despite the differences between those who had the visions, each vision was interpreted clearly and accurately.

Inheriting Prophethood

One of the special attributes of Joseph (Peace be upon him) was that he was a prophet, son of a prophet, grandchild of a prophet and great grandchild of a prophet (i.e. son of Jacob, the grandson of Isaac, and the great grandson of Abraham (Peace be upon them)). This lineage is clear in a tradition of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him), which goes as follows:

“He was asked: ‘Who is the most honored amongst people?’
He said: ‘The most honored in the sight of Allah is the one who fears Him.’ They said: ‘Not about this, we ask you!’
He said: ‘Then, the most honored amongst people is Joseph the Prophet of Allah, the son of the Prophet of Allah, the son of the Friend of Allah.’ They said: ‘Not about this, we ask you!’ He said: ‘Are you asking me about the Arabs?’

Joseph

(Peace be upon him) and his youngest brother did not work as herdsmen, it was that they were still too young to do so! It is simply not conceivable that all 12 brothers would go out to take care of the cattle, and it is far more likely that the younger brothers would be expected to stay home and perform tasks appropriate for their age, which would include, of course, taking care of their elderly father.

Two Models of Brothers

We know, then, that Joseph (Peace be upon him) was extremely polite to his father, to whom he was very close, and that he would entertain him and seek his advice. We also know that Joseph's brothers, despite being the children of a prophet, plotted against both Joseph and their father. They knew, of course, that what happened to one would affect the other, just as they knew that the pain of the parent would possibly be the greater; later on in the story, the pain of losing Joseph becomes so great that Jacob (Peace be upon him) loses his eyesight. The way that the older brothers spoke about their father was certainly far from polite; after complaining about the fact that he appeared to love Joseph and his brother more than he loved them, they said: "...Verily, our father is obviously in error!"
Qur'an, 12:8

An Unjustified Conspiracy

"Slay ye Joseph or cast him out to some [unknown] land,
that so the favor of your father may be given to you alone:
Afterwards, ye shall become righteous." Qur'an, 12:9

This is what the Children of Israel think; that the *other* must either be killed or deported. How cheap human life became, and how hard the hearts of so many... Of the many Qur'anic verses that mention the various characteristics of the Children of Israel, the two that follow are excellent examples:

“They were covered with humiliation and misery: they drew on themselves the wrath of Allah. This is because they went on rejecting the Signs of Allah and slaying His Messengers without just cause. This because they rebelled and went on transgressing.” Qur'an, 2:61

“Thenceforth were your hearts hardened: they became like a rock and even worse in hardness...” Qur'an, 2:74

So why, exactly, did Joseph's brothers intend to kill him or send him into exile, which could have easily resulted in his death? As mentioned before, Joseph (Peace be upon him) was certainly not guilty of having committed any crime! No, it was simply because of the love of his father... At any rate, what the brothers chose to do proved to be outright collective punishment, for it harmed not only Joseph, but also his father and later in the story, his youngest brother.

Some Characteristics of the Children of Israel

The characteristics of the Children of Israel include the following: a desire to kill the *others* or send them into exile, away from their homeland, hardened hearts, envy, snobbery, selfishness [“I am better than the other, and if I am to die thirsty, let there be no rain”], a tendency to commit premeditated crimes whilst looking for a way out [“Afterwards, ye shall become righteous”], and a belief in the idea that the end justifies the means [“That so the favor of your father may be given to you alone”]. Even the way in which the brothers referred to their father - “your father,” not “our father” - was impolite and representative of their personalities.

Just look at what we have! A group of ten brothers agreeing on a death sentence for their brother, with only one of them suggesting a lighter ‘sentence’:

“Said one of them: ‘Slay not Joseph, but if ye must do something, throw him down to the bottom of the well: he will be picked up by some caravan of travelers.’” Qur'an, 12:10

Joseph

The 'kind' and 'reasonable' brother wanted to reduce the sentence of his innocent brother from death to being thrown down a well, to be picked up and sold like a slave!

The result of forced exile is reflected in broken hearts; this was indeed the case when it came to both Joseph (Peace be upon him) and his father. As to the brothers, one only has to listen to the words of the most 'merciful' among them to realize that it was hardened not broken hearts that resided inside their chests.

Plotting and Deception

Not one of the ten brothers possessed a kind heart and normal emotions. Had this not been the case, one of them would surely have revolted against the plot of his siblings and leaked the news of it to Joseph (Peace be upon him) and his father in the hope of saving the life of the former. Instead, their consensus reflected their vicious intentions:

“They said: ‘O our father! Why dost thou not trust us with Joseph, seeing that we are indeed his sincere well-wishers? Send him with us tomorrow to enjoy himself and play, and we shall take care of him.’” Qur'an, 12:11-12

Conspiracy, deception, addressing their father without showing him due respect and as someone who was inferior to them, or, in the best scenario, as an equal - “Why dost thou not trust us?” - and fabricating stories to cover their crime... these were the 'ethics' of these Children of Israel.

As to Jacob (Peace be upon him), he attempted to resist his children's request that Joseph (Peace be upon him) be allowed to accompany them, but to no avail. His intuition told him that Joseph was in danger, yet he could not have imagined that his other sons would stoop so low. His words sound like pleading, but they fell on deaf ears:

“[Jacob] said: ‘Really it saddens me that ye should take him away: I fear lest the wolf should devour him while ye attend not to him.’ They said: ‘If the wolf were to devour him while we are [so large] a party, then should we be the losers!’” Qur’an, 12:13-14

Consensus without Mercy

How beautiful it is to have a consensus when it comes to something good, and how ugly it is to have one when it comes to crime and evil. The Qur’an exclaims in the context of the second type of consensus:

“Is there not among you a single right-minded man?”
Qur’an, 11:78

In the case of Joseph’s brothers, there was a consensus of the second type, and they consequently went ahead with their evil plan:

“So they did take him away, and they all agreed to throw him down to the bottom of the well...” Qur’an, 12:15

They did so without expressing any remorse. Had they abandoned their plan, even in its later stages, it would still have been much better, for to return to truth is preferable to continuing to engage in wrongdoing.

The Qur’an does not mention the details of the brothers’ crime, which causes us to ask a number of questions: Was Joseph (Peace be upon him) excited by the idea of going out to play? How did he prepare himself for a day of joy and fun? What kind of clothes did he wear? What did he say to his father? What did his father say to him? Did he invite his little brother to go with him? Were his brothers kind to him on the way, or was it the case that some of what they concealed in their hearts was reflected in their behavior? How far did they take him? Was it to a nearby pasture or to a distant one that they took him? Did they study the well? Was it empty, or did it contain some water? What does “they threw him into the well” actu-

Joseph

ally mean? Did they throw him violently, or did they send him down with the help of a rope? Once Joseph was in the well, did his brothers express their true feelings towards him out of a twisted desire for revenge? What did Joseph say and do? Did he shout and seek help, or did he remain silent? Did he try to change his brothers' minds and to move their hearts, if they had any to begin with?

We do not know the answers to any of the questions mentioned above, and we can only imagine the details. What we do know for sure is that we are talking here about a child of approximately ten years of age. Those who suggested that Joseph (Peace be upon him) was 17 exaggerated, for it would not have been appropriate for someone of that age to go out to play and have fun; in addition, the choice of vocabulary reflects the aspirations of a child, not a teenager. Besides, had Joseph been as old as 17, it is most unlikely that he would not have tried to resist or defended himself when it became apparent that his brothers were planning to throw him in the well.

At any rate, this story reflects the cruelty of the Children of Israel towards their brother. It also reflects their dishonesty and ability to lie – all this, to have their father for themselves...

Allah is with those who are Wronged

It was the will of Allah that tranquility and hope would find their way to the heart of this child who was so badly wronged:

“...And We put into his heart [this Message]: Of a surety thou shalt [one day] tell them the truth of this their affair while they know (thee) not.” Qur’an, 12:15

The message was clear: if your relatives leave you to your destiny, and the dark souls overwhelm you, you should know that the door to Allah is open and that His care of you is inevitable:

“So, verily, with every difficulty, there is relief. Verily, with every difficulty, there is relief.” Qur'an, 94:5-6

An Exposed Act

After the brothers had committed their terrible crime, they needed to fabricate a story to tell their father. It would have been better if at least one of the ten had returned to his senses and prevented the situation from deteriorating any further; after all, it was still possible to return to the well, release Joseph (Peace be upon him), and apologize. Unfortunately, however, this is exactly the nature of the Children of Israel, to complete their crimes until the very end, or, in the best scenario, to come up with an insincere and disgusting apology. One is reminded of how, under Israeli occupation, four Bedouin women were shot to death in their tent; according to the subsequent investigation, the shooting incident had been a ‘mistake’!

Crocodile Tears

“Then they came to their father in the early part of the night, weeping. They said: ‘O our father! We went racing with one another, and left Joseph with our things; and the wolf devoured him. But thou wilt never believe us even though we tell the truth.’ They stained his shirt with false blood. He said: ‘Nay, but your minds have made up a tale [that may pass) with you. [For me] patience is most fitting against that which ye assert. It is Allah [alone] whose help can be sought.’” Qur'an, 12:16-18

Can we even begin to imagine how Jacob (Peace be upon him) must have felt when he saw his children return without his beloved Joseph (Peace be upon him)? How painful it is when a father is stung by his own children and is fully aware of it! In some respects, the fact that the brothers lied to their father is worse than what they did to Joseph. Had they not pledged to protect him? Had they not given assurances to their father? Moreover, had they not told him that they would be losers if the wolf were to devour their brother? Although the brothers were supposed to be Joseph's guards

Joseph

and protectors, they claimed that they had left him with their belongings, so does that mean that he was supposed to guard them?

The tongue of a liar betrays him. Did the brothers not say, “Thou wilt never believe us even though we tell the truth”? This was but one indication that they were lying, but there were others:

1. Had the wolf devoured Joseph (Peace be upon him), would there not have been some remains - bones for example - for the brothers to bring home?
2. Why did the wolf leave all the sheep, young and old, in order to attack the child?
3. The brothers brought back Joseph’s shirt, which indicates that it was still intact. How is it possible that a wolf would attack and devour the child without ripping the shirt into pieces?

Confronted by the wrongdoing of his children, Jacob (Peace be upon him) found solace and refuge in Allah:

“[For me] patience is most fitting against that which ye assert. It is Allah [alone] whose help can be sought.” Qur’an, 12:18

Joseph in the Well

“Then there came a caravan of travelers: they sent their water-carrier [for water], and he let down his bucket [into the well]... He said: ‘Ah there! Good news! Here is a [fine] young man!’ So they concealed him as a treasure! But Allah knoweth well all that they do!”

“They sold him for a miserable price, for a few dirhams counted out: In such low estimation did they hold him!” Qur’an, 12:19-20

A child, whose brothers plotted against him and then threw him into a dark, cold well, found himself isolated and struggling against all kinds of strange and difficult conditions. These conditions should have shattered the life of the child, yet Joseph (Peace be upon him) persevered and faced the new reality with courage and patience. It is ultimately the grace of Allah that saved him.

How long did Joseph (Peace be upon him) stay in the well, one or several nights? Did any of his brothers come back to check on him? Did they talk to each other? Only Allah knows the answers to such questions. We know, however, that a caravan eventually passed by the well, and that it was a water-carrier who discovered Joseph, perhaps as a result of the child clinging to a bucket. Unfortunately, however, the travelers considered the child a free addition to their goods.

One can only imagine the kind of conversation that took place between Joseph (Peace be upon him) and his captors. He must have asked them to send him back home in exchange for any amount of money, but his pleading was ignored, and he soon found himself being sold in the slave market. Any human being would find becoming a slave degrading; in the case of someone like Joseph, whose father, grandfather and great grandfather were all prophets, it must have been all the more humiliating.

II. JOSEPH IN THE HOUSE OF THE 'AZIZ

Joseph (Peace be upon him) was sold on the streets of Egypt. He was sold very quickly, no doubt because the travelers who had found him were worried that were he to remain with them, his family would eventually find him. It was his fate to end up in the house of the high-ranking Egyptian official, the 'Aziz. Although Joseph was to find wealth and comfort awaiting him in the home of the 'Aziz, he must have suffered, terribly, as a result of the psychological wounds associated with being a slave and living as a stranger in a foreign land. Even the fact that the 'Aziz asked his

Joseph

wife to take care of Joseph in the hope that they would somehow benefit from him or perhaps take him as their son - for it seems they could not have children of their own - could have done little to ease Joseph's pain:

“The man in Egypt who bought him, said to his wife: ‘Make his stay [among us] honorable; maybe he will bring us much good, or we shall adopt him as a son’...” Qur’an, 12:21

A New Kind of Calamity

A new and difficult test awaited Joseph (Peace be upon him) in the home of the ‘Aziz. The previous test had been about life and death, whereas this one was about honor, dignity and faith. The previous test had taken place amidst harsh conditions, whereas this one took place against a luxurious background. Yet, if the first test could be described as ‘difficult’, then the new one could only be described as ‘terrible’. One must remember that if a human being dies without abandoning his morals and religion, then he is dignified in this world and the Hereafter. If, however, he slips into vice, regardless of his socio-economic status, then he faces humiliation, loss and the wrath of Allah.

Joseph (Peace be upon him) became an extremely handsome young man. As a slave, he was expected to do whatever was required of him by his master's wife, but unfortunately, this particular lady had beauty, wealth... and an uncontrollable desire to seduce him. In fact, the wife of the ‘Aziz was relentless in her attempts to seduce Joseph in the privacy of her home. As to Joseph, he knew what her plans were but opted to play deaf and blind and, by closing his eyes and ears, to secure his heart against her temptations. At one point, however, the wife of the ‘Aziz became desperate enough to close all the doors and actually invite Joseph, in no uncertain terms, to enter into an intimate relationship:

“But she in whose house he was, sought to seduce him and she fastened the doors, and said: ‘Now come, thou (dear one)!’ He said: ‘Allah forbid! Truly [thy husband] is my

lord; he made my sojourn agreeable! Truly to no good come those who do wrong!”

“And [with passion] did she desire him, and he would have desired her, but that he saw the evidence of his Lord: thus [did We order] that We might turn away from him [all] evil and shameful deeds: for he was one of Our servants chosen.” Qur'an, 12:23-24

Frustrated by Joseph's reaction to her offer and now completely overcome by passion, the wife of the 'Aziz chased after Joseph (Peace be upon him), grabbing at the back of his shirt in a bid to stop him from running away and ripping it in the process. It was at that same fateful moment that the 'Aziz entered the room. Without blinking, his wife accused Joseph of attempting to sexually assault her, going on to demand that he be tortured or imprisoned; killing him, of course, was not mentioned, for in spite of almost being discovered, she was still determined to seduce him.

Joseph (Peace be upon him) defended himself using reason and wisdom. With his usual politeness, he presented a very brief account of what had happened though whilst taking great care to avoid mentioning details and causing anyone the slightest embarrassment. In the end, it was a relative of the wife of the 'Aziz who came up with an answer to the dilemma in which the 'Aziz now found himself:

“... And one of her household saw [this] and bore witness, [thus]: ‘If it be that his shirt is rent from the front, then is her tale true, and he is a liar! But if it be that his shirt is torn from the back, then is she the liar, and he is telling the truth!’ So when he saw his shirt, that it was torn at the back, [her husband] said: ‘Behold! It is a snare of you women! Truly, mighty is your snare!’” Qur'an, 12:26-28

The 'Aziz, who was deeply hurt, asked Joseph (Peace be upon him) not to mention what had happened to anyone; as to his wife, he simply asked her to repent. However, in spite of the efforts to contain the problem, news of

the affair spread. With regard to the source of the ‘leak’, if not the palace servants, then it was most certainly the wife of the ‘Aziz herself, who, as we shall now see, was not averse to talking about the incident in certain circles.

It was only a matter of time before the women of the city heard about what had happened and began to criticize the wife of the ‘Aziz for attempting to seduce ‘her boy’! They clearly found her to be at fault: “... We see she is evidently going astray.” Qur’an, 12:30

One interpretation is that the women believed that the wife of the ‘Aziz should have looked for someone of her own social standing. Whatever the cause of their condemnation, their words were to quickly reach the wife of the ‘Aziz herself, who became desperate to prove to the women that had they been in her position, they would have done exactly the same thing, or perhaps something far worse! Her plan was a simple but effective one: she invited the women to her home for some kind of social gathering, presented them with fruits and fruit knives and then, whilst they busied themselves peeling and slicing the various fruits, asked Joseph (Peace be upon him) to come forward. When Joseph actually appeared, the women, so overwhelmed were they by his beauty, all cut themselves by accident with the knives in their hands. It should be mentioned in this regard that there is a tradition of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) in which the Prophet is quoted as saying: “Joseph possessed half the beauty [in the world].”

The wife of the ‘Aziz was therefore very successful in trapping the other women and getting them to see her side of the story. In their case, a single look resulted in their spilling blood, so imagine the plight of the woman who saw him day and night in her house! And so it was that she somehow avenged herself and declared victory:

“She said: ‘There before you is the man about whom ye did blame me! I did seek to seduce him from his [true] self but he did firmly save himself guiltless! ... And now, if he doth

not my bidding, he shall certainly be cast into prison, and [what is more] be of the company of the vilest!" Qur'an, 12:32

Such a statement reflects the mentality of a determined woman who refused to take no for an answer. Indeed, the wife of the 'Aziz was increasingly open about her desires, so sure was she that Joseph (Peace be upon him) would eventually succumb to her advances; so confident in fact, that at no point did she consider the possibility that he would actually prefer prison:

"He said: 'O my Lord! The prison is more to my liking than that to which they invite me. Unless Thou turn away their snare from me, I should feel inclined towards them and join the ranks of the ignorant.' So his Lord hearkened to him [in his prayer] and turned away from him their snare: verily He heareth and knoweth [all things]." Qur'an, 12:33-34

Joseph (Peace be upon him) chose the long-term pain of being incarcerated rather than the short-term joy associated with physical pleasure because it was the right thing to do; had he given in to the wife of the 'Aziz, it would have resulted in humiliation far greater than that he endured in prison. The fact that Joseph sought refuge in Allah and asked for His help is an acknowledgement of human weakness; if there is no Divine help, Man is helpless.

Illogical Solution

"Then it occurred to the men, after they had seen the Signs, [that it was best] to imprison him for a time." Qur'an, 12:35

It is, of course, totally unfair to imprison the virtuous whilst allowing the guilty to go free, especially when there is no doubt whatsoever concerning the innocence of the former, but in this particular case, the decision to lock up Joseph (Peace be upon him) was not so much a form of punishment as it was a means to get him away from the grasp of the wife of the

'Aziz; it is almost certain that the 'Aziz was aware of the fact that if Joseph were to remain in the house, the inevitable would happen, thanks to his reckless wife. There is also the possibility that the gossip of the women, which came to focus on how the wife of the 'Aziz had no intention of relinquishing her plans for Joseph, eventually found its way to the 'Aziz, who, in all likelihood, truly believed that by keeping Joseph locked up, he would cause his wife's lust to diminish. There is, is there not, in certain circumstances, an element of truth to the saying, "Out of sight, out of mind"? One thing is certain; the wife of the 'Aziz was extremely influential and her orders were respected. Twice she threatened that she would have Joseph imprisoned if he did not obey her, and as we know from the story, her threats were not in vain.

It is appropriate at this stage to mention several important lessons contained within this particular story:

1. It is not possible for an adopted child to have the same status as a natural child, or to be always treated as one; although the 'Aziz believed it was possible to take Joseph (Peace be upon him) as a son ["... or we shall adopt him as a son"], his wife was more interested in taking him as a lover. It is for this reason that Islam abolished adoption all together. The message to those who adopt young children is clear; no matter how many times words such as 'mother' and 'father' are exchanged, once the child approaches adulthood, it is possible that feelings, the choice of words, and the very nature of the 'child-parent' relationship could change. This applies to children of both sexes; I myself have heard stories concerning adopted female children whose 'fathers' one day came to think of them as potential brides, or even worse, mistresses. How is it possible to change natural instincts simply by referring to an adopted child as one's son or daughter? How many women went to perform pilgrimage [to Mecca] with men they addressed as "My brother in God's sight," only to marry them upon their return?

2. A stranger in the house is like a live charcoal under the ashes. This is also true with regard to maids and servants; how many times have they found themselves engulfed in the flames of their [sexual] desires, or those of their employers, and vice? In certain countries, mainly those with a huge domestic service industry, there have even been scandals involving the trading of children!
3. Allowing a man and woman to be alone together – unless they are close relatives and therefore unable to marry – is a recipe for disaster and a key to vice. Said the Prophet (Peace be upon him): “No man stays with a woman in seclusion except that Satan is the third one.”
4. It is usually the man who flirts with the woman, yet even if he is able to fight his natural instinct and stand up to Satan, there is always the possibility that Satan will entice the woman to tempt him [“But she, in whose house he was, sought to seduce him”], which is another way to vice.
5. It is possible for the human being to overcome Satan; regardless of how strong evil is faith can emerge victorious.
6. A human being with a clean heart cannot act unjustly and tarnish the honor of the person who was kind to him.
7. Following the course that normally yields results does not necessarily result in success: the wife of the ‘Aziz attempted to seduce Joseph, closing the door and availing herself to him, yet all her efforts were in vain.
8. The inclination of the heart [towards the other sex] is not a sin [“and he would have desired her”] but a reflection of human nature. It should not translate, however, into action [outside of wedlock].
9. Joseph (Peace be upon him) was pure and innocent, and he had many witnesses on his side. Allah says in the Qur’an: [“he was one of Our servants chosen”], which is in line with another verse in the Qur’an in which Satan admits that he has no power over those whom Allah chooses: the witness from the family of the wife of the ‘Aziz who set the criterion [“But if it be that his shirt is torn from the back, then

she is the liar, and he is telling the truth.’ So when he saw his shirt, that it was torn at the back...”]; the wife of the ‘Aziz herself who ultimately admitted that Joseph was guiltless [“I did seek to seduce him from his [true] self but he did firmly save himself guiltless”]; and the women who testified [“No evil know we against him”].

10. Sin results in humiliation, which is why the Qur’an says: “They both found her lord”. It does not say “her husband,” nor does it say “his lord”; it is as if the wife became the slave and Joseph (Peace be upon him) the free person.
11. Many people rush to accuse others of committing the same crime or sin of which they themselves are guilty, regardless of their innocence, in a bid to defend themselves: [“She said: ‘What is the (fitting) punishment for one who formed an evil design against thy wife?’”]
12. It is always a problem when the wife has absolute power over her husband; in this particular case, the wife of the ‘Aziz practically issued executive orders to her husband, insisting that Joseph’s punishment should be either prison or a grievous chastisement.
13. Joseph (Peace be upon him) possessed many commendable qualities, including a genuine belief in the importance of honesty; he consequently neither trembled nor hesitated to tell the truth even in the most difficult circumstances.
14. When a witness is a relative of the ‘victim’ and he testifies in favor of the accused, it is a great proof of innocence.
15. The ‘Aziz did not take any action against his wife despite knowing for sure that she had gone astray or was well on her way to doing so. He only asked her, very quietly, to repent. This implies that in the homes of the elite, vice is tolerated more than it is elsewhere.
16. The ‘Aziz was convinced of Joseph’s innocence, which is why he showed him respect by calling him by his name [“O Joseph, pass this over!”] while refraining, at the same time, from showing his wife the same respect and instead, merely turning to her and asking

her to repent [“Ask for forgiveness for thy sin, for truly thou hast been at fault!”].

17. News of a scandal pierces the walls, flies to the ears, and hastens to the tongues; it then becomes difficult for people to forget it.
18. It seems that in the homes of the governing aristocrats, it is not considered shameful to have an extramarital affair, though it is certainly considered shameful to have an affair with someone of a lower social status. If one listens carefully to the words of the women [“the wife of the ‘Aziz is seeking to seduce her slave”], it becomes clear that they were blaming the wife only because Joseph (Peace be upon him) was a slave.
19. The snare of women is great.
20. Women and young men often find themselves infatuated with someone of the opposite sex, yet in most cases, the fact that they are infatuated with a particular person does not become common knowledge.
21. Amongst the rich and famous, the word ‘shame’ is often unknown. For proof of this, one only has to listen to the words of the wife of the ‘Aziz: “If he doth not my bidding, he shall certainly be cast into prison...”
22. Joseph (Peace be upon him) did the right thing when he chose to spend time in prison, for his choice was religiously pure and ethically sound.
23. Both sinning and obedience become history. The difference is that sinning becomes a dark history, obedience an honorable one.
24. Life passes by and carries a record of all things. Lucky, then, is the one who inscribes good deeds on the pages of history.
25. Seeking refuge in Allah is imperative, because He is the source of all help [“Unless Thou turn away their snare from me, I should feel inclined towards them and join the rank of the ignorant.”]

26. To recognize human weakness, especially in the face of sexual desire, reflects true feelings and a healthy understanding of reality.
27. There is nothing worse than the culprit acting as judge and his ruling being implemented.
28. When an innocent person is proven innocent, it is beautiful; the opposite, however, is ugly.
29. Imprisonment is an ancient form of punishment that still exists; it is the graveyard of those who still live.
30. Administrative detention [inherited by the Israelis from the British Mandate and applied to Palestinian political activists] is the worst form of imprisonment because it involves arresting people in the absence of any formal charges. What is worse is that the arrest often comes with a declaration that the incarcerated victim is innocent; this is what happened in the case of Joseph (Peace be upon him).

A New Episode of the Test

It was Joseph's fate to emerge from one dire situation, characterized by injustice and false witnessing, only to face another. After being saved from the snare of his brothers, he was then confronted by that of the wife of the 'Aziz, but this time, his only escape was prison. Can you imagine what prisons in Egypt were like in those ancient times? There was no electricity and therefore no light or air-conditioning. Moreover, there were no organized services or established rights for prisoners. Joseph (Peace be upon him) was placed under administrative detention, yet he was sent to a jail containing both political dissidents and common criminals, and one can assume that having thieves and criminals as fellow inmates must have surely increased his pain. Yet, in spite of the depressing atmosphere, Joseph, drawing on his strong personality, remained steadfast. Such is the fate of dedicated and patient men who soar high above events and who ultimately rise above the most difficult of circumstances without allowing them to break their will.

Two of Joseph's fellow inmates had dreams that revolved around their desire to be set free; both men, it should be mentioned, had been accused of crimes far greater than that of Joseph (Peace be upon him), which, in relation to theirs, was as pure as a cloud, floating in the sky. The two prisoners found solace in talking about their dreams, believing, perhaps, that doing so would bring them closer to the day when they would finally be released, and eventually, both of them asked Joseph to interpret a particular dream. Worthy of mention in this regard is the fact that during the years he spent in prison, Joseph acquired a reputation as an interpreter of dreams and someone who was wise, knowledgeable and mature. He therefore became a refuge for his fellow prisoners, who said: "...for we see thou art one that doth good (to all)." Qur'an, 12:36

Joseph (Peace be upon him) found in the request of his fellow prisoners a chance to call them both to Allah. He wanted to present the idea of faith and a broad outline of creed to them in a concise and easily understandable way:

"He said: 'Before any food comes (in due course) to feed either of you, I will surely reveal to you the truth and meaning of this ere it befall you...' " Qur'an, 12:37

Joseph (Peace be upon him) also wanted to strengthen their confidence in him and to convince them that he was capable of predicting things that had yet to happen, though he was careful to remind them that it was only with Allah's help that he was able to do this:

"That is part of what my Lord hath taught me. Verily, I have abandoned the ways of a people that believe not in Allah and that [even] deny the Hereafter. And I follow the ways of my fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob..." Qur'an, 12:37-38

This is how a human being should use his reason to differentiate between good and bad, abandoning the unacceptable in favor of faith and ethics.

He should believe in the Hereafter, despite those who disbelieve and who scoop from the filth of the earth and satisfy their lust as best they can in prohibited ways. Only belief in the Hereafter can correct the path of such offenders. Worthy of mention at this point is the fact that it was the family of prophets comprising Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Peace be upon them) that formed the school of faith that uprooted the roots of association.

“It is only a gift from Allah and through His mercy, grace and care that we have faith [yet most men are not grateful].” Qur’an, 12:38

To commit a sin is the opposite of showing gratitude. Therefore, let us be grateful by not associating anything or anyone with Allah, and let us be believers. Joseph’s message emphasized the following:

1. Belief in the Hereafter;
2. The need to abandon disbelief and fight association;
3. The fact that one should follow in the steps of virtuous people;
4. The fact that it is through the grace of Allah that one has faith;
5. The fact that most people are not grateful, because to be grateful implies accepting responsibility and disbelief is associated with being irresponsible. The latter is more enjoyable, which is why most people carry its banner.

After giving his concise rendering of the principles of faith, Joseph (Peace be upon him) attempted to emphasize the oneness of Allah by saying “Are many lords differing among themselves better, or Allah the One, Supreme and Irresistible?” Qur’an, 12:39

Showing commendable wisdom, Joseph (Peace be upon him) tried to get closer to his fellow inmates by referring to them politely as the "companions of the prison." Having earned their trust, he criticized the tendency to

worship deities other than Allah, stating that such deities were nothing but invented names with no use or value:

“Whatever ye worship apart from Him is nothing but names which ye have named, ye and your fathers, for which Allah hath sent down no authority: the Command is for none but Allah: He hath commanded that ye worship none but Him: that is the right religion, but most people understand not...” Qur'an, 12:40

After this successful use of the opportunity with which the two young men provided him, Joseph (Peace be upon him) proceeded to interpret their dreams:

“O my two companions of the prison! As to one of you, he will pour out the wine for his lord to drink; as for the other, he will be crucified, and the birds will eat from off his head. [So] hath been decreed that matter whereof ye twain do enquire.” Qur'an, 12:41

Joseph (Peace be upon him) did not point in the direction of the one who was going to be executed, nor did he use the third person singular to address him. Instead, he resorted to wisdom and to saying, “As to one of you,” thereby preventing the collapse of the one facing death. Although one can connect each dream with a particular interpretation, the general statement mentioned above allows room for some vagueness, which was no doubt helpful, given the circumstances as it allowed each of the two prisoners to believe that he was the one who was going to become a ‘bar-tender’ for the king.

Joseph (Peace be upon him) decided, however, to take a small chance by asking a favor of the one that he believed was about to be saved, saying, “Mention me to thy lord.” His interpretation was accurate; one of his companions was executed and the other released. Unfortunately, however, the one who was released, as is common amongst newly released prisoners, became preoccupied with his new life; this affected his old memories,

Joseph

and the talks and promises connected with his life in prison vanished like bubbles: "...But Satan made him forget to mention him to his lord: and [Joseph] lingered in prison a few [more] years." Qur'an, 12:42

The common belief is that Joseph (Peace be upon him) remained in prison for between three and nine years.

The King's Vision

The vision of the king was the fourth to be mentioned in the *Sura* of Joseph:

"The King [of Egypt] said: 'I do see [in a vision] seven fat kine, whom lean ones devour, and seven green [ears of corn], and seven [others] withered. O ye chiefs! Expound to me my vision if it be that ye can interpret visions.'" Qur'an, 12:43

The 'chiefs' made it clear to the king that they were not able to interpret his dream: "...A confused medley of dreams: and we are not skilled in the interpretation of dreams.'" Qur'an, 12:44

It was then that the released prisoner remembered that Joseph (Peace be upon him) was a capable interpreter of dreams and that he had asked him to mention his name to the king. Shortly thereafter, he arrived at the prison after being granted permission to discuss the king's vision with Joseph. We do not know of any dialogue between the two men except that concerning the central issue, the vision.

Public Interest Overrides Personal Interest

It did not occur to Joseph (Peace be upon him) to avenge himself by refusing to interpret the vision; had he refused, his refusal would have had dire consequences for the future of Egypt. On the contrary, he hastened to interpret it:

“(Joseph) said: ‘For seven years shall ye diligently sow as is your wont: And the harvests that ye reap, ye shall leave them in the ear, except a little, of which ye shall eat. Then will come after that [period] seven dreadful [years], which will devour what ye shall have [specially] guarded. Then will come after that [period] a year in which the people will have abundant water, and in which they press [wine and oil].’” Qur’an, 12:47-49

When a matter is extremely important – as it was in this case – it can cause one to ignore one’s personal interests. This time, Joseph (Peace be upon him) did not ask his companion to mention his name to the king, for it was not his desire to provide advice in exchange for personal gain, even though he had not only interpreted the vision, but also provided advice about saving food for the time of the famine.

When Joseph’s former prison-mate returned to the king and told him about Joseph’s interpretation, the king naturally became interested in meeting Joseph (Peace be upon him) and in knowing the person who was so interested in saving the country and preserving the public interest. He therefore ordered that Joseph should be released and sent a messenger to bring him to the palace.

Declaring Innocence Comes First

When the messenger arrived at the prison, Joseph (Peace be upon him) – to everyone’s amazement – refused to leave. Why did he do this, especially in light of the natural desire of every man to be free? The answer is that Joseph was determined to clear his name; in other words, he wanted all those concerned to know the truth:

“...But when the messenger came to him, [Joseph] said: ‘Go thou back to thy lord, and ask him, ‘What is the state of mind of the ladies who cut their hands?’ for my Lord is certainly well aware of their snare.’” Qur’an, 12:50

Joseph

What, after all, is the value of freedom that is stained? Joseph (Peace be upon him) knew that people would surely hold the prison term against him, just as he knew that it was most unlikely that anyone would believe that he had remained in prison for quite a few years without ever having committed a crime. It was imperative therefore that he put the record straight.

Joseph's Wish Becomes True

Glory be to Allah, whenever He showers His favors on His servant. Here is a prisoner, or rather a slave who was bought with money and who was imprisoned upon the orders of the same person who bought him, dictating the conditions for his release, and to the king himself! Joseph (Peace be upon him) wanted the old case reopened and for a new investigation to take place, and the great surprise was that the king agreed to Joseph's demand and sent for the women in order to ask them what had happened. It was time, at last, for the truth:

“[The king] said [to the ladies]: ‘What was your affair when ye did seek to seduce Joseph?’ The ladies said: ‘Allah preserve us! No evil know we against him!’ Said the ‘Aziz’s wife: ‘Now is the truth manifest [to all]: it was I who sought to seduce him. He is indeed of those who are [ever] true [and virtuous].’” Qur’an, 12:51

The following verse can be attributed to either Joseph (Peace be upon him) or the wife of the ‘Aziz:

“‘This [say I], in order that he may know that I have never been false to him in his absence, and that Allah will never guide the snare of the false ones.’” Qur’an, 12:52

If it was the wife of the ‘Aziz who spoke these words, then she was obviously attempting to stress the fact that she had not been false to Joseph in his absence. If, on the other hand, the speaker was Joseph (Peace be upon

him), then his words no doubt referred to the fact that he had never betrayed the 'Aziz.

Important Lessons from the Prison Episode

1. It is important that one understands the calamity that has befallen one and how to cope with it.
2. The best of prisoners is the one who helps and entertains his fellow prisoners.
3. Dreams and visions, which are a vital part of the life of the prisoner, are capable of provoking both felicity and sadness.
4. It is usually possible to interpret visions, even if the person who has a particular vision is not a good person.
5. To have someone who is considered a reference amongst prisoners is a mercy and a gift from Allah.
6. The person who calls people to the path of Allah uses every opportunity to do so.
7. It is important that in choosing the topics he addresses, the preacher makes it a point to discuss the most important issues first.
8. Some of the most important issues to be addressed are the Hereafter, the Oneness of Allah, and the danger posed by associating others with Allah and believing in fabricated deities.
9. One should have total faith in Allah and be positively dependent on Him.
10. It is easy for the prisoner to forget his ordeal inside prison once he is released and preoccupied with everyday issues.
11. Prisons sometimes host innocent people, and for many years.
12. Kings and governors are also keen to understand their visions and have them interpreted.

13. The best answer is “I do not know” when it comes to questions that one cannot address [“We are not skilled in the interpretation of dreams.”]
14. It is during the darkest of nights that one most misses the moon.
15. Scolding someone does not always yield good results and can have negative consequences. To ignore an old offence is better than reminding the offender of his misdemeanor.
16. Good advice is always valid, regardless of whether it is intended for the good or the bad, the unjust ruler or the citizen.
17. Public interest has priority over personal interest.
18. To maintain one's dignity and honor while in jail is better than enjoying one's freedom if it is associated with a hedonistic lifestyle.
19. Allah, the Most Exalted, sometimes avails the governor to serve the weak.
20. Truth eventually emerges: “And say: ‘Truth has [now] arrived, and Falsehood perished: for Falsehood is [by its nature] bound to perish.’”
Qur’an, 17:81
21. To confess one's sins is better than prolonging wrongdoing.
22. Human souls are normally open to Satan's temptations: “The [human] soul certainly incites evil, unless my Lord do bestow His Mercy...”
Qur’an, 12:53

III. JOSEPH IN CHARGE OF THE STOREHOUSES

The king's first attempt to have Joseph (Peace be upon him) brought to him [“Bring ye him to me”] failed because Joseph refused to leave prison until after the king had interrogated the women. Once the women had confirmed that Joseph was innocent, the king decided to send for him again: “So the king said: ‘Bring him unto me; I will take him specially to serve about my own person...’” Qur’an, 12:54

One notices that the wording of the king's two commands is vastly different and that when the king ordered Joseph to be brought to him for the second time, he made it abundantly clear that Joseph (Peace be upon him) was to hold a very special position. Joseph was indeed honored and received well by the king: "...Therefore when [the king] had spoken to him, he said: 'Be assured this day, thou art of high standing with us, invested with all trust.'" Qur'an, 12:54

Joseph (Peace be upon him) realized that the conditions were now ripe for his requesting a specific position: "(Joseph) said: 'Set me over the storehouses of the land: I am a good keeper, knowledgeable.'" Qur'an, 12:55

Worthy of mention is the fact that the two attributes that Joseph (Peace be upon him) used to describe himself – i.e., 'good keeper' and 'knowledgeable' – are the most important qualifications of an economist who oversees the interests of people and who handles their livelihood. It is no wonder – especially in light of Joseph's many other attributes – that the king was to offer him a high-ranking position that befitted his character.

Joseph (Peace be upon him) was indeed virtuous and knowledgeable, so much so that he was to come to fulfill the role of the 'Minister of Finance, Agriculture, Trade, Industry, and practically everything else'! This is reflected in the following verses of the Qur'an, after which there is no further mention of the king or the 'Aziz:

"Thus did We give established power to Joseph in the land, to take possession therein as, when, or where he pleased. We bestow of Our mercy on whom We please, and We suffer not, to be lost, the reward of those who do good. But verily the reward of the Hereafter is the best, for those who believe, and are constant in righteousness." Qur'an, 12:56-57

To be well established on earth is the fruit of patience and perseverance, made possible by faith and piety. Yet, Allah's reward is far greater than being established on earth.

Something to Consider

Do you see that had Joseph (Peace be upon him) agreed to the devilish project of the wife of the 'Aziz, he would have remained a slave until his death and would have been denied prophecy? Having faith in God and displaying patience resulted not only in his becoming an advisor to the king, but also in his almost becoming the king himself, so vast was his power! There is a tremendous difference between the fruits of submission to the will of Allah and the fruits of indulgence in sin.

Famine throughout the Region

The seven years of abundance passed by and were subsequently followed, by the seven lean years, as had been predicted. Poverty in the region became rampant; plants withered, udders became dry, and people suffered from cramps, so great was their hunger.

Fortunately, however, the hands that were overseeing the wealth of Egypt were indeed trustworthy and the consumption of food was well planned. As a result, the country was able to retain provisions and distribute them in the appropriate manner. In fact, the situation in Egypt caused people from countries affected by the famine to travel there in search of supplies, including the brothers of Joseph (Peace be upon him) who came from Greater Syria in order to buy wheat and to seek assistance in order to feed their families.

Joseph (Peace be upon him) recognized his brothers when they arrived in Egypt, but they failed to recognize him; after all, it had been many years since they had thrown him into the well when he was still a young child. Besides, they would hardly have expected to find their younger brother holding such an important position:

“Then came Joseph’s brethren: they entered his presence,
and he knew them, but they knew him not.” Qur’an, 12:58

A Legitimate Stratagem

It is permissible for a human being to use deceit to claim his rights. Here we find Joseph (Peace be upon him), after many years of tests and deprivation, devising a plan to bring his father and the rest of his family to Egypt. It was, of course, unthinkable that Joseph would leave the storehouses of Egypt at such a crucial time; being such a responsible and trustworthy person, he was committed to being in control of the treasury on a daily basis. He therefore refused to allow his emotions to control him, in spite of his desire to be reunited with his father and youngest brother. Just a little more time and patience, and they would come to him...

Joseph (Peace be upon him) knew from his conversation with his brothers that both his father and youngest brother were alive, so he asked them to return to Egypt, bringing their brother with them, even going so far as to make it a condition for his doing business with them in the future. In order to guarantee their swift return, Joseph ordered the servants to put the goods that his brothers had brought to barter with in their saddlebags, thereby making it clear to his brethren that he was both trustworthy and generous; had the brothers returned home without the goods, they might have found themselves bankrupt and unable to return to Egypt, whereas upon finding their goods, they would be bound to return and search again for provisions and food.

Joseph's plan worked. His brothers, now convinced that they should return to Egypt, asked their father to allow their younger brother to accompany them, making it abundantly clear that were he to say no, there would be no more food or trade. Jacob (Peace be upon him), who remembered all too well what had happened to Joseph, was concerned; would someone who was once bitten by a snake not panic if he were to see a rope being pulled along the ground?

“He said: ‘Shall I trust you with him with any result other than when I trusted you with his brother aforesaid? But Al-

Joseph

lah is the best to take care [of him], and He is the Most Merciful of those who show mercy!” Qur’an, 12:64

The brothers, who used the presence in their saddlebags of the goods that they had used for bartering as further proof that they should return to Egypt without haste, promised to protect their youngest brother:

“...We shall take care of our brother; and add [at the same time] a full camel's load [of grain to our provisions]. This is but a small quantity.” Qur’an, 12:65

Jacob (Peace be upon him), his heart still heavy with pain and sorrow as a result of the loss of Joseph (Peace be upon him) and his sons’ behavior, responded by asking the brothers to swear that they would not harm or plot against the sibling they were now so desperately keen to take with them to Egypt.

It could be that it was revealed to Jacob (Peace be upon him) that he should surrender Joseph (Peace be upon him) to the brothers and then trust them with his youngest son later on. It could also be that he knew from the revelation that there were pleasant surprises ahead, the details of which, at that stage, were still a mystery.

Advice and a Flawless Plan

“Further he said: ‘O my sons! Enter not all by one gate: Enter ye by different gates...’” Qur’an, 12:67

Jacob (Peace be upon him) advised his sons to enter separately from different gates, but why? Was it to protect them from envy? Was it so that Joseph (Peace be upon him) would have a chance to talk to his youngest brother in private, out of the earshot of his older siblings, or was it simply because the dispersion of the brothers would create a better opportunity for Joseph to meet them?

When Joseph (Peace be upon him) finally met his youngest brother, he recognized him at once and was able to talk to him at some length without his other brothers being present. He comforted his youngest sibling, revealed his identity and told him that he wanted him to remain with him. The problem was that Joseph needed to come up with a plan in order to keep his brother at his side, and so he placed a drinking cup in his saddlebag, in order to justify his arrest. Joseph then had it announced that the beaker of the king had been stolen and that “for him who produces it, is the reward of a camel load.” The other brothers were, of course, horrified, for all they wanted was to complete their business and return home as soon as possible:

“(The brothers) said: ‘By Allah! Well ye know that we came not to make mischief in the land, and we are not thieves!’
Qur’an, 12:73

It was actually the brothers themselves who suggested that once discovered, the thief should be imprisoned, so confident were they that none of them had stolen the beaker. Joseph’s scheme had worked! After searching the saddlebags of the older brothers, he began to search that of the youngest and, of course, found the beaker. Now all he had to do was to execute the sentence recommended by his siblings!

The reaction of the brothers to the discovery of the beaker – no doubt, to Joseph’s dismay - was to slander both of their younger siblings by saying, “If he steals, there was a brother of his who did steal before him...” Joseph (Peace be upon him), who refrained from revealing his secret, replied as follows:

“...Ye are the worse situated; and Allah knoweth best the truth of what ye assert!” Qur’an, 12:77

The older brothers began to plead and to beg Joseph (Peace be upon him) to allow their younger brother to go free and imprison one of them instead. They even tried to influence his decision by telling him about their

Joseph

aged father, but Joseph rejected their emotional appeal, saying it was unjust to replace the criminal with the innocent. It was at that point that Jacob's eldest son, having recalled the plight of his father as a result of what he and his brothers had done to Joseph, refused to return home and asked his brothers to tell his father what had happened. It is assumed that he simply could not bear to see yet another tragedy befall their father and witness firsthand its effect on him. Worthy of mention is the fact that he insisted that his brothers should prove to their father that what they said was the truth. He was no doubt aware of the fact that Jacob (Peace be upon him) would remember the 'proof' they had provided when Joseph went missing – i.e., Joseph's blood-stained shirt – and that whatever they said, he was unlikely to believe them.

Jacob Loses His Sight

When the brothers returned home and relayed the painful news to their father, the new wound, not surprisingly, reopened the old one:

“And he turned away from them, and said: ‘How great is my grief for Joseph!’” And his eyes became white with sorrow, and he fell into silent melancholy.” Qur’an, 12:84

The brothers tried to comfort their father but their efforts were in vain. Not for the first time, Jacob (Peace be upon him) sought refuge in Allah:

“He said: ‘I only complain of my distraction and anguish to Allah, and I know from Allah that which ye know not...’”
Qur’an, 12:86

A Believer Cannot be Hopeless

In spite of the new catastrophe that had befallen him, Jacob (Peace be upon him) requested that his sons return to Egypt to look for Joseph (Peace be upon him) and his brother:

“...and never give up hope of Allah’s Soothing Mercy: truly no one despairs of Allah’s Soothing Mercy, except those who have no faith.” Qur’an, 12:87

The brothers returned to Egypt in the hope that Joseph (Peace be upon him) would release their brother and perhaps even show pity and give them some charity, for their situation by now was indeed very bad.

Frankness

When the brothers arrived back in Egypt, Joseph (Peace be upon him) decided it was time to be frank and to reveal his true identity:

“He said: ‘Know ye how ye dealt with Joseph and his brother, not knowing [what ye were doing]?’” Qur’an, 12:89

The brothers were surprised. Their deed had remained a secret amongst them, so who could have mentioned it to this ‘exalted’ official? They knew, of course, that a wolf had not eaten Joseph (Peace be upon him) - they had always assumed that a caravan had picked him up - and so they began to scrutinize his appearance more closely. It was then that they realized who he was:

“They said: ‘Art thou indeed Joseph?’ He said: ‘I am Joseph, and this is my brother: Allah has indeed been gracious to us [all]: behold, he that is righteous and patient, - never will Allah suffer the reward to be lost, of those who do right.’” Qur’an, 12:90

Righteousness and patience are the most crucial components when it comes to fulfilling one’s ambitions. Joseph’s brothers, who were ridden with guilt, apologized profusely and asked for forgiveness, but Joseph (Peace be upon him), who bore no grudge against them, had no desire to see them punished, as is reflected in the following words:

Joseph

“He said: ‘This day let no reproach be [cast] on you: Allah will forgive you. And He is the Most Merciful of those who show mercy.’” Qur’an, 12:92

The Miracle of the Shirt

“Go with this my shirt, and cast it over the face of my father: he will come to see [clearly]. Then come ye [here] to me together with all your family.” Qur’an, 12:93

This was truly the miracle of a prophet! Joseph (Peace be upon him) knew, due to a Divine revelation, that his shirt would cure his father’s blindness. When the brothers arrived home carrying the shirt in question, Jacob (Peace be upon him) immediately sensed that there was news of Joseph. It should be mentioned that Jacob had never forgotten Joseph’s vision in which he saw eleven plants prostrating before him and that he realized that, in light of his age, there was not much time left if the vision was to be fulfilled.

Imagine Jacob’s sorrow when, for the hundredth time, his sons showed their true character - they clearly hadn’t changed - by saying the following when he mentioned that he could “detect the scent of Joseph”: “...By Allah! Truly thou art in thine old illusions.” Qur’an, 12:95

Then, however, the shirt was cast over Jacob’s face, and he regained his sight. It was an excellent sign, and Jacob (Peace be upon him) reminded his children of Allah’s grace: “...He said: ‘Did I not say to you, I know from Allah that which ye know not?’” Qur’an, 12:96

Confronted by such a miracle, the brothers felt obliged to confess their sins and to seek their father’s forgiveness:

“They said: ‘O our father! Ask for us forgiveness for our sins, for we were truly at fault.’”

“He said: ‘Soon will I ask my Lord for forgiveness for you: for He is indeed Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.’” Qur’an, 12:97-98

Jacob (Peace be upon him) said “soon” because his heart was still heavy because of his sons’ behavior, which made it difficult for him to forgive them immediately.

The Realization of the Vision

It is possible for a vision to be realized ten or even 20 years after the vision first appears. Joseph (Peace be upon him) received his family very well, raising his parents high on the throne; as to his brothers, they prostrated themselves before him out of respect, causing him to remember the vision that he had described to his father whilst still a young child. In spite of all the tests that Joseph had been forced to endure, in speaking to his father about the vision, he mentioned only the good things, thereby proving, once again, that his faith in Allah and in Allah’s wisdom was beyond question:

“...O my father! This is the fulfillment of my vision of old! Allah hath made it come true! He was indeed good to me when He took me out of prison and brought you [all here] out of the desert, [even] after Satan had sown enmity between me and my brothers...” Qur’an, 12:100

Out of kindness to his brothers, Joseph (Peace be upon him) attributed all the negative events to Satan.

A Concluding Supplication

The story of Joseph (Peace be upon him) concludes with a beautiful supplication that could indeed be a lesson for those who are keen to think and ponder:

Joseph

“O my Lord! Thou hast indeed bestowed on me some power, and taught me something of the interpretation of dreams and events, - O Thou Creator of the heavens and the earth! Thou art my Protector in this world and in the Hereafter. Take Thou my soul [at death] as one submitting to Thy Will [as a Muslim], and unite me with the righteous.”
Qur'an, 12:101

Here, Joseph (Peace be upon him) enumerates the blessings of Allah without referring, even once, to the numerous hardships that he had been forced to endure. It is the mercy of Allah that he seeks, for Allah to take his soul upon his death, as one submitting to His will (as a Muslim), and unite him with the righteous in the Hereafter. What could possibly be greater than this request?

Between the Desires of Human Beings and the Wisdom of Divine Will

We would have wished that the brethren of Joseph (Peace be upon him) had not envied their brother. We would have wished that they had neither plotted against him nor thought of killing him or throwing him into the well. If only they could have shown him some mercy after throwing him into the well and gone back to rescue him. If only one of them had felt some remorse and told their father the truth, after seeing the tears in his eyes. If only some local herdsmen had found Joseph and brought him home. If only the travelers had listened to Joseph's story and let him go out of mercy, or at least sought some reward from his father in exchange for setting him free. If only the wife of the 'Aziz had not attempted to seduce him and allowed him to live in peace. If only she had not acted unjustly by demanding that Joseph be imprisoned. If only there had been justice leading to the imprisonment of the woman and the release of the young man. If only Joseph's companion in prison had not forgotten to tell his lord about Joseph's story. If only Joseph had left prison the first time the king attempted to release him...etc.

We would have wished all that out of feelings of mercy for Joseph and Jacob (Peace be upon them) and out of an interest in justice. The fact is, however, that had any of the episodes of Joseph's life not taken place - in other words, had any of our wishes, mentioned above, been fulfilled - then there would be no happy ending to this beautiful story. One has to remember: the tragedy that befalls an individual or a small group in exchange for the good of a whole people is inevitably beneficial.

The events mentioned in the chapter of the Qur'an dealing with the story of Joseph (Peace be upon him) resemble blocks that were put into place, one after the other, until a building was erected. They were designed so that if a single block were missing, the whole building would collapse. Who would have interpreted the king's vision had Joseph not interpreted the visions of his two prison mates? Who would have introduced Joseph to the king had one of his companions in prison not done so? Who would have saved Egypt and its vicinity, and who would have saved the brothers of Joseph, their father and the nomads who lived next to them, if it was not for Joseph's sense of justice? How would Joseph have become such a high-ranking official, trusted and respected by everyone, had a single block been missing?

Had the famine lasted for seven years without Joseph being put in control of the storehouses of Egypt, then it would have devastated Egypt and Greater Syria. Joseph (Peace be upon him) himself would have surely perished, and his whole family along with him.

Have you noticed how perfect the design of Allah is? Praise be to Allah! There is a verse in the Qur'an that reflects the moral message of this story:

“...But it is possible that ye dislike a thing which is good for you, and that ye love a thing which is bad for you. But Allah knoweth, and ye know not.” Qur'an, 2:216

Joseph

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