

Chapter 12, Yusuf (Joseph) (part 1 of 2)

Description: A brief commentary of Chapter 12 (verses 1-66) of the Holy Quran. The story of Prophet Joseph is a story of suffering and sadness, focusing on putting one's trust in God and knowing that He is the best of Planners. Part one sees Joseph being torn away from his loving father and thrust into slavery, and ends with Joseph securing a high position in the Egyptian government.

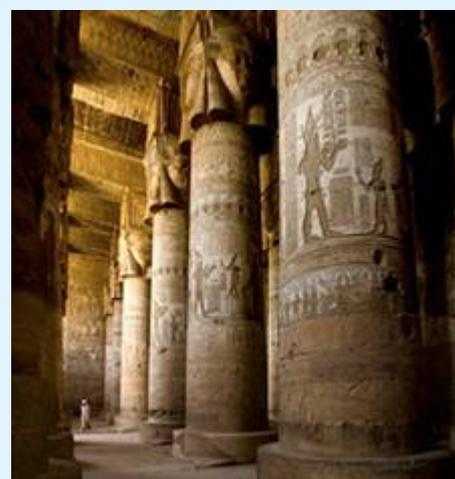
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Introduction

The story of Joseph was revealed after an Israelite asked Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, what he knew about Prophet Joseph. The story of Joseph was not known to the Arabs at the time and it was part of a test the Jews concocted to test Prophet Muhammad's claim to prophethood.^[1] Stories in the Quran are usually told in small bites and revealed over several chapters; the story of Joseph however, is different. It was revealed in one chapter, from the beginning to the end.



The story of Joseph is framed by a three verse introduction and a 10 verse epilogue. It is generally agreed that it was revealed in Mecca in a year that is known as the Year of Sorrow. Prophet Muhammad lost two of his closest supporters, his uncle Abu Talib and his beloved wife Khadijah. The story of Joseph confirms unconditionally that God has total control over all affairs. It is a story of patience in the face of adversity and trust in the face of sorrow.

Verses 1-3 The best story

The Quran is a book revealed to make things clear, it is revealed in the Arabic language and contains information that Muhammad did not know. This story is called the best of stories meaning that it contains information relevant to events happening at the time of revelation and it contains lessons for all humankind.

Verses 4-18 Dreams and deception

Joseph has a dream in which he sees the sun, moon and eleven stars prostrating before him. This is interpreted as men bowing down to him. He confides in his father who advises him to keep it secret from his brothers.

Joseph and Benjamin were the sons of Jacob's second wife. The older boys considered themselves men. They were older, they were stronger and saw in themselves many good qualities. Blinded by jealousy they plan to kill Joseph. One of the brothers convinces the other brothers to throw him in a well instead. They carry out their devious plan and using their father's worst fear (a wolf attack) and a blood stained shirt, they try to convince him of Joseph's death. Meanwhile, God eases Joseph's fear. God inspires him that one day he will inform his brothers of their deed while they do not realize who he is. Joseph's father Jacob sensed treachery but turned to God and accepted the news with trust and patience.

Verses 19-22 Joseph is established in Egypt

Joseph is rescued from the well and sold into slavery. He is sold for a small price to an influential man from Egypt, who comments to his wife that Joseph may be of some service to them. God remarks that He established Joseph in the land and provided him with sustenance in order to teach him the interpretation of dreams. God has full power and control over all affairs but most people are blind to this. Joseph grows up in comfortable conditions and God bestows upon him good judgment and knowledge. He is in the house of a politician learning how to negotiate and make wise decisions.

Verses 23-30 The failed seduction

The wife of the Egyptian politician watches Joseph grow to manhood and is attracted to him. She tries to seduce him but he seeks refuge in God. The wife chases Joseph to the front door just as her husband is entering the house. The wife tries to blame Joseph but a member of the household points out that his shirt was torn from the back. The women of the city began to gossip about Joseph and the politician's wife.

Verses 31-35 Joseph prefers prison

After she hears the gossip, she invites the women to her house in order to show them how beautiful and attractive Joseph is. She hands each of them a knife and calls for Joseph to show himself. The women are astounded and cut their hands. She explains that she tried to seduce him but he resisted. She threatens that if he does not obey now he will go to prison. Joseph is afraid that he will let himself be seduced so he asks God to protect him, saying he would prefer prison to what the women are planning.

Verses 36-40 More Dreams

He is imprisoned along with two other men. The two other prisoners discuss their dreams with Joseph and ask him to interpret them. One of them said, 'I dreamed that I was pressing grapes'; the other said, 'I dreamed that I was carrying bread on my head and that the birds were eating it.' Joseph mentioned their next meal reminding them that God provides their sustenance then replies that he is able to interpret dreams because God has taught him to do so. He spells out his belief in God and in the Day of Judgement. Joseph asserts that his family, the family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob hold the knowledge of the Oneness of God, and that his religion and family do not attribute partners to God.

Most people however do not realise this.

Verses 41-42 Joseph languishes in prison

Joseph interprets the dream. One will serve wine to his master; the other will be crucified and the birds will peck at his head. Joseph asks the one to be saved to mention him (Joseph) to his master. But Satan makes the man forget and Joseph languishes in prison for more time.

Verses 43-57 Joseph's innocence is established

The King (of Egypt) asks his counsellors to interpret his dream. 'I dreamed about seven fat cows being eaten by seven lean ones; seven green ears of corn and [seven] others withered.' They were unable to do so and the ex-prisoner remembered Joseph. He ran to Joseph, Joseph interprets the dream and the King asks for Joseph to be brought into his presence. The ex-prisoner goes back to Joseph but Joseph asks him to ask his master (the King) about the women who cut their hands. The King establishes Joseph's innocence. Joseph says he wanted his master, the politician to know that he did not betray him or abuse his trust. Joseph appears before the King who offers him a position of high rank. Joseph asks to be put in charge of the storehouses. In this way God settles Joseph in the land. God points out that He grants mercy to whomever He wishes, and does not fail to reward good. The reward in the Hereafter, He points out, is the best.

Verses 58-66 A dream prediction fulfilled

Joseph's brothers present themselves asking for their measure of grain. Joseph recognizes them but they do not recognize him. He asks them to come again, this time with their younger brother. Without him they will not be permitted to have the grain. They reply that they will try to persuade their father and get his permission. Joseph tells his servants to put the goods his brothers traded for grain back in their saddle bags in order to make them eager to return. The brothers ask Jacob to let them take their younger brother but he is wary asking "Am I to entrust him to you as I did his brother before?" The brothers open the saddle bags and find their good returned to them. Jacob says he will not send the boy unless the brothers swear they will do everything humanly possible to keep him safe. They gave their pledge and Jacob said, 'Our words are entrusted to God.'

Endnotes:

[1] Ibn Kathir, Stories of the Prophets.

Chapter 12, Yusuf (Joseph) (part 2 of 2)

Description: A brief commentary of Chapter 12 (verses 67-111) of the Holy Quran. Joseph has become an important man in the Egyptian government and his brothers have approached him for grain. The story concludes with Joseph revealing his identity and reuniting with his family.

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Verses 67-76 The brothers return

Jacob advises his sons to not all enter the city by the same gate as a precaution but at the same time tells them that this will not help them against the will of God. All power is in God's hands, says Jacob.

The sons of Jacob present themselves to Joseph and he draws his youngest brother (Benjamin) aside and reveals his identity to him. Joseph gives his brothers their portion of grain but places his drinking cup in his youngest brother's pack. Someone calls out and accuses the caravan of thievery. 'What is lost?' the brothers ask. 'The King's drinking cup', is the reply, and 'whoever returns it will be given a camel's load of grain'.

The brothers respond that they did not come to make mischief. Joseph's men ask the brothers what penalty should apply if they are found to be lying. They answered, 'the penalty will be the enslavement of the person in whose bag the cup is found: this is how we punish wrongdoers.' Joseph did not want his brother punished under the laws of Egypt but wanted the opportunity to keep his brother with him while the others returned to their father Jacob. The bags are searched and the cup is found in the youngest brother's belongings. God explains that He devised a plan for Joseph and that He will raise the status of whomsoever He wills.

Verses 77-82

The brothers allude to Benjamin's brother (Joseph) being a thief, but Joseph controls himself and does not disclose his identity. The brothers beg that one of them be allowed to stay in his brother's stead; this is refused. Finally the eldest brother, remembering the pledge he gave to his father, vows to stay in Egypt until Jacob gives him permission to leave or God decides on another course of action. The remaining brothers return to their father Jacob saying, we tried to keep our pledge but we could not have foreseen that your son would steal. Ask the people we travelled with if you need proof.

Verses 83-86

Their father said, 'No! Your souls have prompted you to do wrong!' He turned away from them saying 'Alas, my grief for Joseph!'. Jacob's eyes went white with grief (he was blind) and the brothers said, 'If you don't stop thinking about Joseph you will ruin your health or even die.' He said, "I only complain of my suffering and my grief to God, and I know from God that which you do not know'. When this new sorrow overwhelmed Jacob, his first reaction was to be patient. He knew, without a shred of doubt, that the affairs of

his beloved youngest sons were controlled by God.

Verses 87-98

Jacob said, 'My sons, go and seek news of Joseph and his brother and do not despair of God's mercy- only disbelievers despair of God's mercy.' So they presented themselves before Joseph without knowing his real identity. They explained that misfortune had afflicted their family and asked Joseph to be charitable towards. God, they said, rewards the charitable. Joseph replied by 'Do you now realize what you did to Joseph and his brother when you were ignorant?' The brothers were astounded and asked if he was Joseph and he said, 'I am Joseph'. They said God really did favour you over all of us; we were in the wrong. Joseph replied that no reproach would be on them and may God forgive them.

Joseph then handed them his own shirt telling them to lay it over their father's face and all would be well, then he asked them to come back altogether. Back at home Jacob was saying that he could smell Joseph, and those around him looked upon him with derision thinking him lost in an old illusion. When the shirt was placed on Jacob's face his eyesight returned and he said, 'Did I not tell you that I have knowledge from God that you do not have?' The brothers asked their father to ask God to forgive them and he replied that his Lord is the Most Forgiving and the Most Merciful.

Verses 99-101

Later when the whole family was presented before Joseph he drew his parents close to him and welcomed them telling them that, God willing they will be safe. They all bowed down to Joseph and he commented to his father that this was the fulfilment of the dream he had so long ago. Joseph said that God had been gracious towards him after Satan had sowed discord between he and his brothers. Joseph prays to God acknowledging his blessings and asking to live and die as a Muslim and be joined with the righteous.

The story of Joseph is a lesson for all of humankind. True patience and the ability to forgive are lofty characteristics worthy of inculcating.

Verses 102-111

That concludes the story of Joseph and in this final 10-verse epilogue God tells Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, that this was the story of which he had no previous knowledge and that he was not present when the brothers made their evil plans. God then tells him that he cannot make the people believe no matter how much he desires to do so. God also mentions that Muhammad asks for no reward yet people ignore the signs in the heavens and the earth and only believe in God while joining partners with Him. How can they be so sure that an overwhelming punishment or the Last Hour will not come upon them when they least expect it? Can the people not see the lessons all around them; how can they travel and see the signs of what happens to the disbelievers and still not understand, do they not have a mind? Here is a lesson for those who understand, this is no fabrication; it a confirmation of the truth and

an explanation for everything ('everything' refers to either the story of Joseph or the religion as a whole, or perhaps both).

In this chapter God was advising Prophet Muhammad that the road may be long and difficult but the ultimate victory belongs to those with God-consciousness and patience.

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