

∞ IN THE ∞
Shade
∞ OF THE ∞
Qur'ān

The Martyr
(Inshā' Allāh)

SAYYID QUṬḐB

Vol X

Sūrahs 12-15

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Transliteration Table

Consonants. Arabic

Initial: unexpressed medial and final:

ء	'	د	d	ض	ḍ	ك	k
ب	b	ذ	dh	ط	ṭ	ل	l
ت	t	ر	r	ظ	ẓ	م	m
ث	th	ز	z	ع	`	ن	n
ج	j	س	s	غ	gh	ه	h
ح	ḥ	ش	sh	ف	f	و	w
خ	kh	ص	ṣ	ق	q	ي	y

Vowels, diphthongs, etc

Short:

ِ	i	َ	a	ُ	u
---	---	---	---	---	---

Long:

ِي	ī	َا	ā	ُو	ū
----	---	----	---	----	---

Diphthongs:

َي	ay	َو	aw
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SŪRAH 12

Yūsuf (Joseph)

Prologue

This *sūrah* is a Makkan revelation, and it follows *Sūrah* 11, Hūd, in the chronological order of revelation. This means that it belonged to the critical period we mentioned in the Prologues to *Sūrahs* 10 and 11, Jonah and Hūd, respectively. This is the intervening period between what is known as the year of sorrow, when the Prophet lost his uncle Abū Ṭālib and his wife Khadijah, both of whom gave him unfailing support, and the time when the new Muslims of Madinah, the *Anṣār*, gave the Prophet their first and second pledges of loyalty and support at `Aqabah. These pledges brought in new support and heralded a far reaching change in the fortunes of the Islamic message and the Muslim community, beginning with the migration of the Prophet and his Companions to Madinah.

The whole *sūrah* was revealed in Makkah, contrary to what is mentioned in some copies of the Qur'ān, stating that verses 1-3 and 7 were Madinan revelations. The first three verses read as follows: "*Alif. Lām. Rā. These are the verses of the Book that clearly shows [the truth]. We have revealed it as a discourse in Arabic so that you may understand. In revealing this Qur'ān We relate to you the best of narratives. Before it you were among those who are unaware [of revelation].*" These verses serve as a logical prelude to what immediately follows, namely Joseph's story: "*Joseph said to his father: 'Father, I saw in a dream eleven stars, as well as the sun and the moon; I saw them prostrate themselves before me.'*" (Verse 4) Then the events of the story begin to unfold, right up to its conclusion. Hence, the reference to Qur'ānic narratives in the opening verse is a perfect prelude to the story.

Moreover, the message of the first three verses belongs fully to the Makkan Qur'ān, emphasizing that it is a revelation from on high, in Arabic, refuting the

idolaters' accusation that a non-Arab taught it to the Prophet. They state that prior to receiving this revelation, the Prophet was totally unaware of its message and the subjects it addressed.

Furthermore, this introduction to the *sūrah* fits perfectly with the comments the *sūrah* provides on the story towards the end: *"That is an account which We have now revealed to you, speaking of things that have been beyond your perception. You were not present when they i.e. Joseph's brothers] resolved upon their plans and completed their schemes."* (Verse 102) We see how the prelude to the story dovetails with its concluding comments, indicating that the entire *sūrah*, prelude, narrative and comments, were all revealed at the same time.

As for verse 7, it is an integral part of the progressing narrative. For it to have been added later, in Madinah, is inconsistent with the whole. For one thing, verse 8 includes a pronoun that refers to Joseph's brothers mentioned in verse 7, which means that verse 8 could not be properly understood unless its were preceded by verse 7. The two verses together read: *"Surely in Joseph and his brothers there are signs for those who inquire. (Verse 7) "They said [to one another]: 'Truly, Joseph and his brother are dearer to our father than we, even though we are many. Surely our father is in manifest error.'"* (Verse 8) All this clearly indicates that the two verses were revealed together as part of the unfolding narrative.

Trials in Plenty

The *sūrah* is a single, complete unit with a clear Makkan character reflected in its subject matter, message and ambience. It reflects the nature of the critical period in which it was revealed. The Prophet was enduring a time when he felt lonely and alienated from his social surroundings, and his followers felt the strains of isolation. With the revelation of this *sūrah*, God tells His noble Messenger, Muḥammad, the story of a noble brother, one Joseph ibn Jacob ibn Isaac ibn Abraham, (peace be upon them all). Joseph too had to endure a series of tests and trials: first, his brothers schemed to get rid of him, then he was thrown into the well where he found himself in fear of his life. This was followed by his becoming a slave sold like an inanimate object, having no say in the matter and losing all the care and love of his parents. He then faced temptation and seduction, followed by the wicked scheming of his master's wife and her fellow women. He then had to endure long imprisonment after having lived comfortably in a palace. A change of fortunes then sees him in a position of power where he had full control of people's basic food requirements and their lives. He subsequently faces a trial of a totally different nature when he meets his brothers whose plot against him started this whole scenario. Throughout, however, Joseph remained a steadfast believer, using these trials to propagate the

divine message. He emerged triumphant at the end, reunited with his parents and family, witnessing the realization of his early dream in perfect relief: *"Joseph said to his father: 'Father, I saw in a dream eleven stars, as well as the sun and the moon; I saw them prostrate themselves before me.'" (Verse 4)*

At this point, all Joseph's thoughts and concerns are focused on turning to God, his Lord, with pure devotion and dedication, giving little importance to worldly considerations: *"When they all presented themselves before Joseph, he drew his parents to himself saying: 'Enter Egypt in peace, if it so pleases God.' And he raised his parents to the highest place of honour, and they fell down on their knees, prostrating themselves before him. He said: 'Father, this is the real meaning of my dream of long ago. My Lord has made it come true. He has been gracious to me, releasing me from prison, and bringing you all from the desert after Satan had sown discord between me and my brothers. My Lord is gracious in whatever way He wishes. He is All-Knowing, truly Wise.' 'My Lord, You have given me power and imparted to me some understanding of the real meaning of statements. Originator of the heavens and the earth! You are my guardian in this world and in the life to come. Let me die as one who has surrendered himself to You, and admit me among the righteous.'" (Verses 99-101)* This was his ultimate request at the moment when he was in a position of power and affluence, reunited with his family. All he wanted was that God should let him die in a state of complete self-surrender to Him and to admit him among the righteous. To him, this was the crowning jewel after a long series of trials, endurance and then triumph.

A Hint of Future Prospects

It is no wonder that this *sūrah*, and the account and comments it gives, was revealed to the Prophet during that particularly difficult time in Makkah, giving him and his followers solace, comfort and reassurance. Indeed the way I think about the *sūrah* gives me the feeling that it carries a subtle hint that the Muslims will be made to leave Makkah to settle somewhere else, where they will enjoy power and achieve victory. It is true that the migration appeared to be enforced by the long persecution endured by the Muslim community. But so was the case with Joseph who was taken away from his parents to endure a long series of trials and tribulations: *"Thus We established Joseph in the land, and We imparted to him some understanding of the real meaning of statements. God always prevails in whatever be His purpose; though most people may not know it."* (Verse 21) This is stated in relation to the moment when Joseph first arrived in Egypt as a young lad being sold as a slave to the Chief Minister.

These thoughts that press on my mind now give me a special appreciation of the ending of the *sūrah* with its final comments on the story. I can only refer to what I feel, though putting such feelings into words is difficult. So the best I can do is to refer to the final verses themselves: *"Even before your time, We only sent [as messengers]*

men to whom We gave Our revelations, choosing them from among their people. Have they not travelled the land and seen what was the end of those [unbelievers] who lived before them? Better indeed is the life to come for those who remain God-fearing. Will you not, then, use your reason? When at length [Our] messengers lost all hope and thought that they were denied, Our help came to them, saving those whom We willed [to be saved]. Never can Our [mighty] punishment be averted from people who are guilty. Indeed their stories give a lesson to those who are endowed with understanding. This [revelation] could not possibly be an invented discourse. It is a confirmation of earlier revelations, an explanation of all things, as well as guidance and mercy for people who believe.” (Verses 109-111)

These verses suggest that the laws God has set in operation in human life take a certain course when God’s messengers lose all hope, as did Joseph in his long series of trials. The course indicates a departure against one’s will that then leads to the desired release. Such hints and inspiration are felt by believers who go through a similar period of trial and hardship as they begin to look forward to a forthcoming release, even though it seems distant.

The *sūrah* is unique in that it relates Joseph’s story in full. Other stories related elsewhere in the Qur’ān are always split into episodes, given in different *sūrahs* so that each episode serves the purpose and theme of the *sūrah* in which it is narrated. When a historical account is given fully in one *sūrah*, as in the case of the stories of Prophets Hūd, Ṣāliḥ, Lot and Shu`ayb, these stories are sketched in summarized form. Joseph’s story, by contrast, is told in full, with complete details, in one *sūrah*, which is unique in the Qur’ān.

This unique approach suits this particular story. The story starts with relating Joseph’s dream and ends with its realization. To give a partial account here, comprising one or a few episodes, and completing it in another *sūrah* would have been unsuitable. Besides, this approach fulfils all artistic aspects while, at the same time, serves the purpose for which the story is included in the Qur’ān.

Artistic Narrative

As narrated in this *sūrah*, Joseph’s story provides the perfect example of the Islamic method of story-telling while enhancing its psychological and educational effects that aim to reinforce faith and strengthen trust in its line of action. Although the Qur’ān maintains the same theme and method of presentation, Joseph’s story stands out as a perfect example of its artistic features.

Joseph, the main protagonist, is shown interacting with all aspects of life across a wide variety of situations. His trials, greatly varied in nature and effect, are all fully portrayed with natural human reactions in each case. Joseph, a perfect model of God’s humble servant, emerges from all these trials pure, untarnished, fully

dedicated, addressing to God a heartfelt prayer that expresses his devotion.

Other characters in the story are presented with varying degrees of exposure, space and focus. The story in this way reveals profound insight into the human psyche, presenting a variety of situations, feelings, reactions and interactions. One such case is that of Jacob, a loving father full of sorrow and a reassured prophet who has been granted special knowledge. Another is that of Joseph's brothers motivated by envy, jealousy and personal grudges into devising a wicked scheme, which weighs heavily on them and leaves them weak and confused. One of them, however, emerges with a different personality that asserts itself in the various stages of the story. A third case is that of the Chief Minister's wife: driven by sexual desire, unashamedly explicit in her expression, and reflecting the situation in the palaces of Egypt during a period of *jāhiliyyah*. She is clearly delineated so as to give us an insight into her personal character and how she is influenced by her environment. We also have an example of aristocratic women in Egypt at the time. Their gossip about the Chief Minister's wife and her slave boy, (note, see my comments in later chapters about this term of reference), their attempts to seduce Joseph, and the threat he receives from his mistress in front of them all give us a clear picture of the Egyptian social environment. We also see a sample of the plots that are continually hatched in the upper echelons of society. This is clearly shown in Joseph's imprisonment. Furthermore, the Chief Minister reflects the attitude of his ruling class in dealing with crimes of honour. The King appears briefly, then moves into the background as does the Chief Minister. All these characters present a multitude of human feelings, attitudes and behaviour that accurately reflect human nature as a whole.

Artistic presentation in the story remains remarkably faithful, realistic and accurate. It does not ignore a single human reality, without creating the sort of squalor of carnal motives and wickedness certain Western circles call 'realism'. Different types of human weakness, including the inability to resist a strong sexual urge, are portrayed showing a perfectly accurate picture of human nature without overlooking a single aspect of it. Nevertheless, the story maintains the highest standard of propriety with clear realism.

Realism and Consistency

Take the case of Joseph's brothers: petty grudges grow in their hearts, reaching great proportions so as to make them lose sight of the enormity of their ghastly crime. They then come up with a 'moral justification' to quieten their consciences. This justification reflects the reality of their religious environment, since they are the children of the Prophet Ya`qūb ibn Ishāq ibn Ibrāhīm (peace be upon them all). Their