

[The Egyptians] said: 'But what shall be the punishment for this deed, if you are proved to be lying?' (74)

They replied: 'He in whose camel-pack it is found shall be enslaved in punishment for it. Thus do we punish the wrongdoers.' (75)

Thereupon, [Joseph] began to search their bags before the bag of his brother, and then took out the drinking-cup from his brother's bag. Thus did We contrive for Joseph. He had no right under the King's law to detain his brother, had God not so willed. We do exalt [in knowledge] whom We will, but above everyone who is endowed with knowledge there is One who knows all. (76)

[Joseph's brothers] said: 'If he has stolen — well, a brother of his had stolen previously.' Joseph kept his secret to himself and revealed nothing to them, saying [within himself]: 'You are in a far worse position, and God knows best what you are speaking of.' (77)

They said: 'Chief Minister, this lad has a father who is very old. Take one of us instead of him. We see that you are indeed

فِي الْأَرْضِ وَمَا كُنَّا سَادِقِينَ ﴿٧٤﴾

قَالُوا فَمَا جَزَاؤُهُ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ كَاذِبِينَ

﴿٧٤﴾

قَالُوا جَزَاؤُهُ مَنْ وُجِدَ فِي رَحْلِهِ فَهُوَ

جَزَاؤُهُ ۚ كَذَلِكَ نَجْزِي الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿٧٥﴾

فَبَدَأَ بِأَوْعِيَّتِهِمْ قَبْلَ وِعَاءِ أَخِيهِ ثُمَّ

اسْتَخْرَجَهَا مِنْ وِعَاءِ أَخِيهِ ۚ كَذَلِكَ

كِدْنَا لِيُوسُفَ ۗ مَا كَانَ لِيَأْخُذَ أَخَاهُ فِي

دِينِ الْمَلِكِ إِلَّا أَنْ يَشَاءَ اللَّهُ ۗ نَرْفَعُ

دَرَجَاتٍ مَن نَّشَاءُ ۗ وَفَوْقَ كُلِّ ذِي عِلْمٍ

عَلِيمٌ ﴿٧٦﴾

﴿٧٦﴾ قَالُوا إِنْ يَسْرِقَ فَقَدْ سَرَقَ أَخٌ لَهُ مِنْ

قَبْلُ ۚ فَأَسْرَهَا يُوسُفُ فِي نَفْسِهِ ۗ وَلَمْ

يُبْدِهَا لَهُمْ ۚ قَالَ أَنْتُمْ شَرُّ مَكَّانًا ۗ وَاللَّهُ

أَعْلَمُ بِمَا تَصِفُونَ ﴿٧٧﴾

قَالُوا يَتَّيِّبُهَا الْعَزِيزُ إِنَّ لَهُ أَبًا شَيْخًا كَبِيرًا

فَخُذْ أَحَدَنَا مَكَانَهُ ۗ إِنَّا نَرَاكَ مِنَ

a generous man.’ (78)

He answered: ‘God forbid that we should take any other than the man with whom we found our property; for then we would be wrongdoers.’ (79)

الْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿٧٨﴾

قَالَ مَعَاذَ اللَّهِ أَنْ نَأْخُذَ إِلَّا مَنْ وَجَدْنَا
مَتَّعَنَا عَلَيْهِمْ إِنْآ إِذَا لَظَلِمُونَ ﴿٧٩﴾

An Encounter with Lost Brothers

Years went by, but the *sūrah* leaves out what happened during them. It does not speak about the years of rich harvest, and how the people went about making the best use of them in their agriculture. Nor does it speak about how Joseph managed the system, and how he stocked the unused harvest. All these seem to be implied in Joseph’s own statement when he requested his appointment: “*I am able to look after them with wisdom.*” (Verse 55) Nor does the *sūrah* mention the arrival of the hard years with poor harvest, or how the people received them, or how they practically lost their livelihood during them. It all seems to be implied in the interpretation of the King’s dream, when Joseph said of these years: “*Then after that there will come seven hard years which will devour all that you have laid up for them, except a little of what you have kept in store.*” (Verse 48)

The *sūrah* does not mention the King or any of his ministers or advisors at any future event. It thus gives us the impression that all matters of importance were left in Joseph’s hands. It was he who managed the whole crisis. Joseph is the one given all the limelight, and the *sūrah* makes effective use of this historical fact.

As for the effects of the years of scarcity, the *sūrah* draws attention to this by referring to Joseph’s brothers as those that came from the desert, in a faraway land, to look for food in Egypt. This gives us an idea of how widespread the famine was. We realize the sort of policy Egypt adopted under Joseph’s direction. It is clear that neighbouring lands looked to Egypt for help, as it became the storehouse for the whole region. At the same time, Joseph’s story and his dealings with his brothers move along in a way that fulfils a religious purpose.

Poor harvests caused famine in the Kanaanite land and its surrounding areas. Joseph’s brothers, as numerous others, went to Egypt after it became known that it had plenty of supplies after having stored its surplus and managed it wisely. We see them here presenting themselves to Joseph, not knowing him for their brother. He immediately recognizes them because they have not changed much. They could not, in their wildest dreams, imagine that he was their brother. Far removed is the young

Hebrew boy whom they cast in the well over 20 years previously from the man in whose presence they now find themselves, the Chief Minister of Egypt in his court and among his assistants and guardsmen.

Joseph did not reveal his identity to them, as he felt they should first learn a few lessons: *"He immediately knew them, but they did not recognize him."* (Verse 58) But the way the story runs suggests that he accommodated them in comfortable quarters, then he prepared their first lesson: *"When he had given them their provisions, he said: 'Bring me that brother of yours from your father's side. But if you do not bring him, you shall never again receive from me a single measure [of provisions], nor shall you come near me.' They said: 'We shall endeavour to persuade his father to let him come. We will make sure to do so. 'Joseph said to his servants: Place their merchandise in their camel packs, so that they may discover it when they return to their people. Perchance they will come back."* (Verses 59-62)

We understand from this that he managed to win their confidence so that they told him their situation in detail, mentioning that they had a young half brother whom they did not bring with them because their father loved him so dearly that he could not part with him.

Hence when he gave them what they needed and they were ready to depart, he told them that he wanted to see their brother: *"He said: 'Bring me that brother of yours from your father's side."* (Verse 59) He justified his request by reminding them that he gives just measure to all who come to buy. He also reminds them that he is very hospitable to all who come. There was nothing to fear if their brother came with them. Indeed he would receive the kind treatment for which Joseph was well known: *"Do you not see that I give just measure and that I am the best of hosts? But if you do not bring him, you shall never again receive from me a single measure [of provisions], nor shall you come near me."* (Verses 59-60)

As they were aware of their father's attachment to their younger brother, particularly after Joseph's loss, they explained to him that the matter was not so easy. Their father was sure to object, but they, nevertheless, would try to persuade him. They confirm their resolve to ensure that he would come with them on their next trip: *"They said: We shall endeavour to persuade his father to let him come. We will make sure to do so."* (Verse 61) Use of the term 'endeavour' in this context describes that the matter would involve much effort on their part.

Joseph, for his part, ordered his men to put back in their packs the merchandise they had brought with them. This might have been some wheat and cattle feed, or might have been a mixture of money and some desert produce or animal hide and hair. All such items were used in commercial exchanges in market places. Joseph, however, wanted all their original merchandise returned so that they might find it when they have arrived home: *"Joseph said to his servants: Place their merchandise in*

their camel packs, so that they may discover it when they return to their people. Perchance they will come back.” (Verse 62)

The Brothers Travel Again

The *sūrah* takes us immediately to the land of Kanaan, where the brothers are talking to their father. The *sūrah* says nothing whatsoever about the return journey, and whether anything of importance happened. Here the brothers are telling their father the most important point that they learnt at the end of their trip: *“When they returned to their father, they said: ‘Father, any [further] grain is henceforth denied us. Therefore, send our brother with us so that we may obtain our full measure [of grain]. We will take good care of him.’”* (Verse 63) They wanted their father to know this urgently, because they say this even before they open their luggage. They tell him that the Chief Minister of Egypt has decided not to give them any further provisions unless they take their younger brother with them. Hence they request their father to let him go with them so that they can buy such provisions. They promise to take good care of him.

This promise must have awakened old memories in Jacob’s mind. It is an exact repeat of their promise to take good care of Joseph. Hence, he speaks of his sorrows that the new promise has revived: *“He replied: ‘Am I to trust you with him in the same way as I trusted you with his brother in the past?’”* (Verse 64) He is in effect telling them he will have nothing to do with their promises. He has no need of the care they may take of his younger son. Should he need any guardianship for him, he will seek it elsewhere: *“But God is the best of guardians; and of all those who show mercy He is the Most Merciful.”* (Verse 64)

Once they had rested after their long journey, they opened their camel-packs in order to store the crops they had bought, but they find instead the merchandise they had taken with them to exchange for crops. Joseph has not given them any wheat or such like, but instead returned their merchandise. So, their first report was that they have been prevented from buying crops, then on opening their camel-packs they found their merchandise. All this was intentional, as Joseph wanted them to return quickly with their brother. That was part of the lesson he wanted them to learn.

In this return of their merchandise, they had additional leverage to persuade Jacob to send their brother with them. Furthermore, it showed they had no ill intention. *“When they opened their camel packs, they discovered that their merchandise had been returned to them. ‘Father,’ they said, ‘what more could we desire? Here is our merchandise: it has been returned to us.’”* (Verse 65) They increase the pressure on Jacob by speaking of the vital interest of his household to obtain food: *“We will buy provisions for our people.”* (Verse 65) They then re-emphasize their resolve to make sure that their

brother will come to no harm: *"And we will take good care of our brother."* (Verse 65) They tempt him with the extra load which they would be able to get easily if their brother travels with them: *"We will receive an extra camel-load: that should be an easy load."* (Verse 65)

It appears from their saying, *"We will receive an extra camel-load,"* that Joseph (peace be upon him) used to give each person a full camel-load only. He would not just give any buyer all the crops he wanted. This was wise in the years of hardship, because it ensured that there was enough food for all.

Jacob finally relents, but makes a strict condition for allowing his youngest son to go with them: *"He said: 'I will not send him with you until you give me a solemn pledge before God that you will indeed bring him back to me, unless the worst befalls you.'"* (Verse 66) He wants them to make a solemn, binding oath that they will bring their young brother back, unless they are faced with a situation that is not of their own making and which they have no means of overcoming. This situation is expressed by the proviso, *"unless the worst befalls you."* There is no other exception to release them from their pledge, which they readily give: *"When they had given him their solemn pledge, [Jacob] said: 'God is witness to all that we say.'"* (Verse 66) This acts as additional emphasis to remind them always of their pledge.

When that was settled, Jacob warns them of the dangers they may face in their new trip: *"And he added: 'My sons, do not enter [the city] by one gate, but enter by different gates. In no way can I be of help to you against God. Judgement rests with none but God. In Him have I placed my trust, and in Him alone let all those who trust place their trust.'"* (Verse 67)

We pause a little here to consider Jacob's statement: *"Judgement rests with none but God."* It is clear from the text that he is referring to fate which is God's inevitable judgement from which there is no escape. That is God's will which will be done no matter what people do to prevent it. Hence his statement is an expression of his belief in God's will, whether it brings benefit or harm. God's will is done and people have no choice but to submit to it. But beside this type of God's judgement, there is His judgement which people apply willingly, by choice. This is the sum of His orders which require them to do certain things and refrain from others. This also belongs to God. The only difference between the two is that people may willingly implement the latter or indeed choose not to implement it at all. Whichever course they choose will have certain consequences which will affect both their present and future lives. People are not true Muslims unless they choose God's judgement and implement it willingly as a matter of their own choosing.

Looking for Unnecessary Details

The party moves along and Jacob's children carry out their father's instructions: *"And when they entered as their father had bidden them, it did not profit them in the least against God. It was but a wish in Jacob's soul which he had thus fulfilled. He was endowed with knowledge which We had given him. But most people do not know it."* (Verse 68) What was the purpose of Jacob's instruction? Why does he want them to enter the city from different gates?

Reports and commentaries provide different explanations for which there is no need. In fact these explanations are against what the Qur'ānic text wants to impart. Had the Qur'ān wanted to enlighten us about the reason for these instructions, it would have stated it, but it does not mention anything other than saying, *"It was but a wish in Jacob's soul which he had thus fulfilled."* (Verse 68) Commentators should likewise stop at this juncture in order to retain the atmosphere the Qur'ān wants to impart. That atmosphere suggests that Jacob feared something for his children, which he felt could be prevented by their entering the city from different gates. At the same time he realizes that he could not avail them anything against God's will. All judgement belongs to God, and all trust must be placed in Him. It was only in an intuitive sense he gave his children this instruction. God had taught him, and he had learnt, that God's will is certain to be done: *"But most people do not know it."* (Verse 68)

What Jacob feared for his children might have been an evil eye, or the King's jealousy, should he see their number and strength, or perhaps he feared highwaymen. Knowledge of that which he feared does not give us anything of substance to add to the subject of the *sūrah*. It only provides a way for commentators to deviate from the highly effective treatment of the subject in the Qur'ān. On our part, we will leave out the reason for Jacob's instructions and the whole trip with whatever events it might have witnessed, because the *sūrah* does not mention any of these. We will look at the next scene when Joseph's brothers have arrived in Egypt.

A Theft is Announced

"And when they presented themselves before Joseph, he drew his brother to himself and said: 'I am your brother. Do not grieve over their past deeds.'" (Verse 69) We note how the *sūrah* does not keep us in suspense but tells us very quickly that Joseph took his brother aside for a private talk telling him that he was his own brother. He also tells him not to bother himself with what his brothers did to him. The *sūrah* tells us straightaway about that, although naturally it must have happened sometime after their arrival, when Joseph has had a chance to speak to his brother in private. Nevertheless, this was the first thought in Joseph's mind when his brothers entered his place and when he saw his full brother after such a long time. Hence, the *sūrah* mentions it as the first action because it is the first thought. This is one of the finer

aspects of the style of this remarkable book.

The *sūrah* then leaves out any details of the hospitality Joseph may have offered his brothers. It simply moves straight to the last scene when the brothers are about to depart. We are made aware of Joseph's plan to keep his brother with him so that his half brothers learn some necessary lessons, which are also useful to all people and all generations: *"And when he had given them their provisions, he placed the [King's] drinking-cup in his brother's camel pack. Then an announcer called out: 'You people of the caravan! You are surely thieves.' Turning back towards them, they said: 'What is it that you have lost?' 'We have lost the King's goblet,' they answered. 'Whoever brings it shall have a camel-load [of grain as a reward]. I pledge my word for it.' They said: 'By God, you know that we have not come to commit any evil deed in this land, and that we are no thieves.' [The Egyptians] said: 'But what shall be the punishment for this deed, if you are proved to be lying?' They replied: 'He in whose camel pack it is found shall be enslaved in punishment for it. Thus do we punish the wrongdoers.' Thereupon, [Joseph] began to search their bags before the bag of his brother, and then took out the drinking-cup from his brother's bag. Thus did We contrive for Joseph. He had no right under the King's law to detain his brother, had God not so willed. We do exalt [in knowledge] whom We will, but above everyone who is endowed with knowledge there is One who knows all. [Joseph's brothers] said: 'If he has stolen – well, a brother of his had stolen previously.' Joseph kept his secret to himself and revealed nothing to them, saying [within himself]: 'You are in a far worse position, and God knows best what you are speaking of' They said: 'Chief Minister, this lad has a father who is very old. Take one of us instead of him. We see that you are indeed a generous man.' He answered: 'God forbid that we should take any other than the man with whom we found our property; for then we would be wrongdoers.'" (Verses 70-79)*

This is a sensational scene, full of movement, action and surprise. Indeed it is one of the most exciting scenes portraying all sorts of reactions. But it is at the same time a real scene portrayed in a breathtaking manner. Very stealthily Joseph puts the King's goblet in the camel-pack which belonged to his younger brother to fulfil a plan which God has inspired him with, and of which we will learn presently. The King's goblet is normally made of gold. It is said that it was used for drinking, but the bottom part was used to measure the wheat, which was a scarce commodity during the years of drought and the famine they brought.

Then as they are about to depart a loud voice announces publicly: *"You people of the caravan! You are surely thieves."* (Verse 70) Joseph's brothers, the children of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham, are alarmed at this announcement accusing them of theft. Hence they turn back to defend themselves, asking first: *"What is it that you have lost?"* (Verse 71) The boys who attend to getting people ready for departure, or the guard, one of whom made the announcement, said: *"We have lost the King's goblet."* (Verse 72) Then there is a further announcement pledging a reward for anyone who brings it forward voluntarily. The reward is very valuable in the prevailing

circumstances: *"Whoever brings it shall have a camel-load [of grain as a reward]. I pledge my word for it."* (Verse 72)

But Joseph's brothers are certain of their innocence. They have not stolen anything. Indeed they have not come to steal or to commit any violation of common law because such violation poisons relations between communities. Hence they make an oath of their innocence: *"By God, you know that we have not come to commit any evil deed in this land."* (Verse 73) They plead their innocence reminding the people that their own status, family and appearance speak for their character and that they would never commit such an offence: *"We are no thieves."* (Verse 73)

Joseph Arrests His Brother

At this point, a challenge was put to them by the guards or staff: *"But what shall be the punishment for this deed, if you are proved to be lying?"* (Verse 74)

Here a part of the design which God has inspired Joseph to employ is revealed. It was customary in Jacob's faith that a thief be taken as a hostage or captive or that he be enslaved in compensation for what he had stolen. Since Joseph's brothers were certain of their innocence, they accepted that their law should be enforced against the one who might be proved to have stolen the goblet. Their reply defined the punishment in their own legal system: *"He in whose camel pack it is found shall be enslaved in punishment for it. Thus do we punish the wrongdoers."* (Verse 75) A thief is a wrongdoer and wrongdoers must be treated according to the law.

This conversation took place in front of Joseph who then ordered that their camel-packs be searched. Wise as he was, he started by searching the camel-packs of his half brothers before that of his younger brother's, so that he did not raise any doubt about the matter: *"Thereupon, [Joseph] began to search their bags before the bag of his brother, and then took out the drinking-cup from his brother's bag."* (Verse 76) The narrative leaves us to imagine the great shock Jacob's sons experienced when they were absolutely certain of their innocence, swearing to it in one voice. It mentions nothing of all this, leaving us instead to contemplate it.

Meanwhile it comments on certain objectives behind the story while Jacob's sons and the onlookers come to themselves: *"Thus did We contrive for Joseph."* (Verse 76) This means that it was God who devised this careful plan for Joseph. *"He had no right under the King's law to detain his brother."* (Verse 76) Had he applied the King's law, he would not have been able to detain his brother; he would have only been able to punish the thief for his theft. He only could detain his brother by the fact that his brothers declared their willingness to implement their own faith. This is the scheme God made for Joseph, inspiring him with its working, or it is what God 'contrived' for him. 'Contrivance', or the Arabic word used for it, *kidnā*, refers to a subtle design

intended for certain ends, good or bad as may be the case, but it is more often used with bad ends in mind. On the surface, this whole design seemed wicked, as it involved a misfortune happening to his young brother, and an embarrassing situation for his other brothers which they would have to face when they returned to their father. Moreover, it would be a sad event for his father, albeit temporarily. Hence, the *sūrah* calls it a contrivance or a plot, using the whole range of meanings for the word, and referring to its appearance in the first place. This is an aspect of the subtlety of Qur'ānic expression.

"He had no right under the King's law to detain his brother, had God not so willed." (Verse 76) His will takes the course we have seen. The verse refers here to the high position achieved by Joseph: *"We do exalt [in knowledge] whom We will,"* (Verse 76) and to the great knowledge he has been given, while reminding us that God's knowledge is perfect and complete: *"But above everyone who is endowed with knowledge there is One who knows all."* (Verse 76) This last comment is a fine way of putting things in proper perspective.

We need to pause a little here to reflect on this fine Qur'ānic expression: *"Thus did We contrive for Joseph. He had no right under the King's law to detain his brother."* (Verse 76) We note first that in the original Arabic text the Qur'ān uses the word *dīn* to refer to the King's law and system. This is the Arabic word for 'religion'. Its usage here defines the exact meaning of *dīn* in this context, which is, as we have just said, 'the King's law and system of government,' which did not punish a thief with slavery. That was the law of Jacob based on his faith. Joseph's brothers accepted the implementation of this law, and Joseph applied it to them when he found the King's drinking cup in his younger brother's camel-pack.

Thus the Qur'ān describes a system of government and law as *dīn*. It is a meaning all people have forgotten in these days of ignorance, including those who call themselves Muslims and those who follow un-Islamic systems, or *jāhiliyyah*. All of them limit the significance of *dīn* to beliefs and worship rituals. They consider anyone who believes in God's oneness and acknowledges the truth conveyed by His Messenger and believes in God's angels, revealed books, messengers, and in the Day of Judgement and the working of God's will, as a follower of the divine faith. They do this even though such a person may submit to, and acknowledge, the sovereignty of different lords besides God. The Qur'ān defines the King's *dīn* as his system of government and legal code. The same applies to God's *dīn*, which means His law.

The significance of the term 'God's *dīn*' has weakened and shrunken in people's perception to the extent that most people today limit it to beliefs and worship rituals. But this was not the case when this *dīn* was conveyed by Adam and Noah through to the days of Muḥammad (peace be upon them all). It has always meant submission to God alone, being committed to His law and rejecting any other legislation. It also

signifies that He alone is God in heaven and God on earth, and that He alone is the Lord of all mankind. Thus it combines God's sovereignty, law and authority. The difference between believers and unbelievers is that the first submit to God's law alone, while those who accept the 'King's *dīn*' submit to the King's system and law. Or they may take a mixture of the two, submitting to God in matters of belief and worship and to some other authority in matters of systems and laws. This is a basic concept of the Islamic faith and it is essentially known to all.

Some people try to find excuses for people on the grounds of their lack of understanding of the significance of the term 'God's *dīn*', which prevents them from insisting on, or thinking about, the implementation of God's law. They say that their ignorance means that they cannot be classified as polytheists associating partners with God. For myself, I cannot see how people's ignorance of the truth of this faith puts them within its boundaries. To believe in a certain truth comes only after knowing it. How can people be said to believe in a faith when they do not know its true significance or what it means?

Their ignorance may exempt people from accountability on the Day of Judgement, or it may reduce their punishment, or it may put the blame for their failure on those who did not teach them the true meaning of this faith of Islam when they were fully aware of it. But this is a matter that God will decide as He pleases. Argument about reward and punishment in the hereafter is generally futile. It is of no concern to the advocates of Islam in this life. What concerns us is to say that people's beliefs today are not exactly the same as God's faith which signifies, according to clear Qur'ānic statements, the law and system He has revealed. Whoever submits to these belongs to God's faith, or *dīn*, and whoever submits to the King's system and legal code belongs to the King's *dīn*. There can be no argument over this. Those who are unaware of the true significance of this faith cannot be believers in it, because their ignorance includes its basic meaning. Logically, a person who does not know the basic meaning of a faith cannot be a believer in it.

It is indeed much better that instead of trying to find excuses for such people, we should try to make clear to them what faith, or *dīn* signifies. They will then be in a position to either accept or reject it, fully aware of the implications of their response.

This is indeed better for us and for the people themselves. It is better for us because it relieves us of the responsibility for the erroneous ways which people follow as a result of their ignorance of the true nature and significance of *dīn*, which results from lack of belief in it. Making the significance of their attitude clear to people, showing them that they are indeed following the King's *dīn* rather than God's faith, is also better for them as it may shake them to the extent that they decide to abandon their erroneous ways and follow Islam. That was indeed what God's