

the portion of that brother. They also signified the generosity of the governor of Egypt to whom the extra measure of the camel (load) is a light measure.

Before we discuss the change in Jacob's attitude, we like to consider the statement of the brothers concerning the full brother: "Surely we will guard him." Here, they were completely truthful while in the case of Joseph they were not. They were not jealous of Benjamin as they were jealous of Joseph.

On the other hand, Jacob's grief for Joseph, which they did not expect to be so intense, had a decisive impact on them especially on the eldest as we shall see. In Jacob's reprimand for them he hit upon the "guarding" that they committed themselves to concerning Joseph

"They said: O our father! Why don't you trust us with Joseph, when lo! We are good advisers to him?"

This time, his reaction was expressed as follows:

"He said: Can I entrust him (Benjamin) to you same as I entrusted his brother to you aforetime?"

Jacob was aware of the brothers' jealousy of Joseph but when they asked him to send him over with them to play and have fun he had no concrete evidence to motivate him to refuse their request. Therefore he simply expressed his worry that a wolf might eat him while they neglect him. But now he has very strong reasons from experience to refuse their request and to blame them for their past.

But what was the dynamic behind Jacob's change of attitude and breaking his silence?

Allah said: "He said: I will not send him with you until you give me an oath/pledge in the name of Allah that you will bring him back to me, unless you are surrounded. And when they gave him their pledge he said: Allah is the warden over what we say."  
(Quran 12:66)

Jacob was certain that Allah's Will shall prevail, if He wills to protect him, He will and if He does not He will not. Thus he comments on the brothers' statement: "verily we will guard him by emphasizing God's Will." He also adds to his saying "Can I entrust him to you same as I entrusted his brother to you aforetime?", the following: "Allah is better at guarding and He is the most Merciful of those who show mercy." The purport is that the brothers' guarding is dependent on Allah's guarding, otherwise it is futile. The statement "unless you are surrounded or overpowered" is indicative of Jacob's complete submission to Allah. Therefore, Jacob did not ask them more than a pledge and when they gave their pledge he said "Allah is the warden over what we say." Jacob's faith in the Will of Allah is absolute.

However, Jacob's worry is not confined to Joseph and his full brother but to all his sons naturally. Therefore he advises them not to enter the city through one gate but to go in by different gates:

"And he said: O my sons! Go not by one gate; go in by different gates. I can avail you nothing against Allah. The final decision rests with Allah only. In Him I put my trust and in Him let all the trusting put their trust." (Quran: 12:67)

The fear of the ill-luck that comes from envy in the hearts of others, can only be prevented by submission to Allah's Will unconditionally.



## **The Brothers' Second Journey to Egypt**

The brothers return to Egypt with Benjamin. They enter the city in the manner advised by their father. Here the Quranic ayat refer to the fact that the father's advice, for fear of unexpected evil or malice was by inspiration from Allah, the Exalted. This is an assurance of the existence of evil and malice and that men should protect themselves against it. Offsetting the evil and malice by human effort and submission to Allah are not mutually exclusive.

"And when they entered in the manner which their father had enjoined, it would have naught availed them as against Allah. It was but a need of Jacob's soul which he thus satisfied. And lo! He was a lord of knowledge we had taught him, but most mankind know not." (Quran 12:68)

Although they entered the city in the way their father had ordered them, this did not protect them against Allah's Will. What he ordered them was given out of a longing in Jacob's soul for he had knowledge that Allah had imparted to him. When they eventually came before Joseph, Joseph took his brother Benjamin apart and told him who he was and comforted him and told him not to put any blame on his brothers for their ill-treatment and not to feel offended or take it to heart.

In the Quran we read:

"When they came before him, Joseph took his brother apart and said to him: "Truly I am your brother, so do not be distressed at what they did." (Quran 12:69)

**Now, how did Joseph retain his brother Benjamin?**

A gold vessel is put in Benjamin's bag. He is accused of theft. We know already that Joseph placed their merchandise in their saddlebags to ensure their return with his brother. Now he resorts to the same deliberate plan, but this time in order to retain, or rather detain, his brother after having informed him about his identity. He has hope by the help of Allah of achieving success in his stratagem.

Allah said "And when he provided them with their provision, he put the drinking cup in his brother's saddlebags, and then a crier cried: O camel riders! You are surely thieves." They cried, coming toward them: What is it you have lost? They said: We have lost the King's vessel and he who brings it shall have a camel load and I (the caller in the name of Joseph) am answerable for it. They said: By Allah, well you know we came not to do evil in the land, and we are not thieves. They said: And what shall be the penalty for he whose bag the cup is found? "The penalty should be that he in whose saddlebag it is found, should be held as (bondsman) to atone for the crime. Thus it is We punish the wrong doers". (Quran 12:70-75)

Joseph's brothers, with the exception of their treatment of Joseph and his brother, were almost perfect in character. So the accusation was shocking to them and most provocative. The reward for the person who finds the lost vessel was a camel load guaranteed by Joseph.

Here the prevailing atmosphere of famine still plays its role. The pressing need for food imposes a number of imperatives. First, there is the extra camel load expected by the brothers to return with, and with their brother (Benjamin) as well. This is a quantity in excess of the quantity they got last time. There is also the promise of a camel load for the person who finds the King's vessel and returns it.

The psychological and pragmatic factors in the situation are too obvious to warrant further analysis. Suffice it to mention that here we find ordered progress in the cumulative impact of the narrative of events in their time sequence each one leading logically to the consequentiality.

They said: "By Allah, well you know we came not seeking mischief (or malice) in the land and are not thieves." (Quran 12:73)

They felt hurt to be falsely accused and denied their intentionality to corrupt the earth by their coming to the governor. They refer to the past as an eloquent testimony of their honesty.



Before we move to the next ayat (verse), it is relevant to stress a point of great significance in this context, namely the penalty for theft in the concept of Jacob and Joseph's brothers on the one hand and in the concept of the King of Egypt on the other hand. In Joseph's community-concept the penalty for the thief was enslavement for a year. In the Pharonic code it was simply to return the stolen thing plus the value of its worth. No enslavement was imposed.

Here the divine intervention plays its role in order to achieve the planned scheme by Allah. The brothers are asked about the penalty that the thief deserves in case the cup is found in his saddlebags. The answer was consistent with Jacob's code since it was unthinkable for the brothers to deviate from the norms of their father, a Prophet of Allah, and have recourse to a secular code that is man-made. Let us ponder the statement by Allah:

"They said: And what shall be the penalty for it if you prove liars? They said: The penalty for it! He in whose bag (the cup) is found should be held as bondsman to atone for it! Thus we requite wrongdoers." (Quran 12:74)

"Then he (Joseph) began the search with their bags before his brother's bag, then he produced it from his brother's bag. Thus did we contrive for Joseph. He could not have taken his brother according to the King's law unless Allah willed. We raise by grades (of mercy) whom We will and over every lord of knowledge there is One more knowing." (Quran 12:76)

Now let us consider Allah's saying:

"Thus did we contrive for Joseph."

If divine providence had not interfered and Allah's inspiration for Joseph to ask the brothers publicly about the penalty for theft in their own code, and their choice for its application because it is ordained by Allah, all Joseph's scheming would have not been adequate to justify the retention of his brother.

Let us also consider the saying by Allah:

“He could not have taken his brother according to the King’s law unless Allah willed.”

The application of the King’s law was supposed to be imposed. However, although it was considered suitable by the King’s folk and well approved by them, yet the will of Allah aided Joseph in taking his brother. Thus the secular human law was discarded and Allah’s law and Judgement were used.

Let us also consider Allah’s saying:

“We raise by grades (of mercy) whom We will.”

Joseph was tested and proved his patience in adversity and his piety and true worship and surrender to Allah. He called for his religion (TAWHID). Allah granted him in this world authority and intuitive knowledge and incalculable blessings and raised his status in this world and in the hereafter, as Allah said

“And the reward of the hereafter is better, for those who believe and are pious.”

And then comes this significant statement:

“And over every knower there is One more knowing.”

The meaning is: no matter how knowledgeable a human can be, Allah the exalted is more knowing. The same meaning is referred to in the Sura Al Isra (The night Journey) ayat 85:

“Whatever knowledge you possess is meager.”

As an illustration the knowledge possessed by Joseph was nothing but inspiration from Allah.

The sequence here satisfies both the religious and artistic objectives. The brothers were flabbergasted and the impact of the shock imbalanced them. It never occurred to their mind that the stolen cup would be found in their brother’s bag. They also realized the danger



of the Judgement they advanced in terms of their code that a thief is to be enslaved.

What is the consequence of all this? Will they return to their father without their brother? Where are the sugary promises they pledged to their father? How will they confront him brotherless after giving him the oath for Allah and the pledge to bring him back? Certainly what happened to Joseph's brother is implied in the saying by Allah upon Jacob's tongue: "Unless you are surrounded."

However, they were wondering when would Jacob believe them that what happened was ordained destiny. What they had done to Joseph in the past was looming large in their horizon. Their father will eventually believe them but after grief had ruined him.

*How would Jacob receive the shock, (while he cherished the hope in Joseph's return one day) of his brother's disappearance, a wound similar to the former? All hopes will be futile and new grief will be added to the old.*

There is an old Arab saying as follows: "Piercing an old wound by a new wound is excruciatingly painful." What is the excruciating pain here? It is Joseph. Joseph's brother was the solace for Jacob. Now the solace, too, is gone. The brothers know with certainty how beloved their brother is to their father. They were also aware that he was his solace after Joseph of whom they got rid of...out of envy.

Now this envy developed into further envy and from this feeling they expressed:

"They said: If he steals, a brother of his stole before." (Quran - 12:77)

The implication here is that Joseph was the source of their distress before, and his brother is the source of distress now since the evidence of his theft is established and this will entail numerous troubles.

The incident reminded them of an occurrence which Joseph carried out in his early childhood. There was an idol worshipped by idolaters

and Joseph took it away and smashed it. The brothers were so consumed with jealousy that they ignored the difference between the two thefts.

What was Joseph's response?

"Joseph kept it secret in his innermost soul and revealed it not unto them. He said within himself: You are in worse case and Allah knows best (the truth of) that which you allege." (Quran 12:77)

It is obvious that the statement Allah knows best refers to the allegation which Allah knows that Joseph is innocent of.

The brothers pursued the matter that was of vital concern to them. Allah said "They said: O ruler of the land! Lo! He has an aged father, so take one of us instead of him. Lo! We behold you of those who do kindness." (Quran12:78)

They requested the governor who was good to them to treat them with the same goodliness in this crisis which they themselves brought upon themselves by their choice of Jacob's code concerning the penalty for him. But Joseph, the fair, replies as the Quran reports:

"He said: Allah forbid that we should seize save him with whom we found our property, otherwise we should be wrongdoing." (Quran12:79)

The logical reply by Joseph made them restlessly despair of their brother's return. They moved away from the crowd and sought seclusion to discuss the matter privately.

Allah said: "So when they despaired of (moving) him they conferred together apart." (Quran 12:80)

One relevant observation here is that the hearts of the brothers were not purified. Joseph's stratagem was to purify their hearts and to bring them to the folds of the pure honest family of Jacob and its firm roots and branches so that they would be thoroughly integrated into their bosom.



He intended not to reveal his identity then. One cannot forget the psychological and physical sufferings of Joseph since they threw him in the well in a most cruel manner rendering him helpless until he was released from prison. Joseph's tactic was to punish them only psychologically. Since their feeling towards Joseph was still hostile, they deserved whatever psychological punishment imposed on them. The time for Joseph's revelation of his identity has not come yet. The course of events kept moving according to the will of the most compassionate, namely Allah.

Perhaps it is not amiss at this point to shed some light on the matter as discussed by *Al Jahiz* "He who does not reward for good deeds and punish for evil doing, and does not kill when killing is a must and does not revive when revivification is a must, and does not forgive in the situation of forgiveness, and does not punish in the situation of punishment, and does not deny in the hour of denial, and does not give in the hour of giving, is disobeying Allah in His divine planning and is under the false impression that his mercy is above Allah's mercy. It has been reported: The killing of the part can give life to the whole. Some forgiveness is a temptation and some refusal is a giving. There is no goodness in the person whose goodness is unconditional and absolute. Worse than that is the person whose evil is pure evil. Mix promise with threat, reward with punishment, smile with frowning, giving with refusing, clemency with requiting for people are not reformed without reward and punishment nor without tempting and augmenting. He who offers and does not requite and becomes famous for that is like the one who promises and does not fulfil his promise and is known for that. He who is reputed for that is affected in proportion to what he is reputed for. The goodliest good is mixed. The vilest evil is stark pure evil, absolute evil. If people are ameliorated by goodness alone, Allah the exalted would have been the One to reward without punishment and not to test with adversity. The fact that all Kings and Imams the world over and throughout the ages apply the desirable and the undesirable is proof of its validity. This validity is tested pragmatically by its consequences and in what is permanent and continues and what is more permanent and what is impermanent." *Al Jahiz: Al Bayan Wa'l.Tabyin*. Printed in Cairo, A.H. 1332.

We shall see how the noble Joseph, when he felt that his brothers

will return to the embrace of Jacob's family, the blessed, the pious, did reveal his identity to them and was too exalted to blame them. While each one of the brothers was anxious to hear a sound solution to this difficult problem from his brothers which actually concerns their aging father, a psychological punishment shoots off, this time like a tempest in the statement uttered by their eldest and wisest, whom they disobeyed in the past and insisted on getting rid of Joseph. It was he who suggested throwing him in the well in order to save his life instead of killing him as they suggested or casting him off in the wilderness where he would be devoured by wild beasts.

Allah said: "The eldest of them said: Know you not how your father took an oath from you in Allah's name and how you failed in the case of Joseph's aforetime? Therefore I shall not go forth from the land until my father gives leave or Allah judges for me. He is the best of Judges." (Quran 12:80)

Return unto your father and say: O our father! Lo! Your son has stolen. We testify only to that which we know; we are not guardians of the unseen. (Quran 12:81)

Ask the township where we were, and the Caravan with which we travelled hither. Lo! We speak the truth." (Quran 12:82)

The brothers executed their brother's instructions precisely and conveyed his words to their father Jacob. The situation this time is different from the one of Joseph when they brought his shirt stained with blood. There was no need for them to deny telling a lie which preoccupied their thinking last time.

Formerly they said: "Even if we were truthful."

This time they said: "Lo! We speak the truth."

What was Jacob's reaction to these brothers?

Allah said: And when they came unto their father and had spoken thus to him he said: Nay, but your minds have beguiled you into something. (My course) is comely patience. It may be that Allah



will bring them all unto me. Lo! He, only He, is the knower, the Wise.

And he turned away from them and said: Alas, my grief for Joseph! And his eyes were whitened with the sorrow he was suppressing. They said: By Allah, you will never cease remembering Joseph till your health is ruined or you are of those who perish!

He said: I expose my distress and anguish only unto Allah and I know from Allah that what you know not.

Go, O my sons, and ascertain concerning: Joseph and his brother and despair not of the compassion of Allah. Lo! None despair of Allah's soothing mercy save disbelieving folk." (Quran 12:83-87)

It is obvious that what Joseph did with his brothers was just and sound. Perhaps someone might ask: What sin has Jacob committed to deserve all this agony for a mistake that his sons made? This is a good question. The answer is: Both Jacob and Joseph being Prophets chosen by Allah do not act by passion or personal opinion. They act on the inspiration of THE Creator. The ayat of the Quran in this connection substantiate this:

Allah said "Thus did we contrive for Joseph. He could not have taken his brother according to the King's law unless Allah has willed. We raise by grades (of mercy) whom we will and over every knower there is one more knowing." (Quran 12:76)

The meaning of this is that whatever befalls Jacob and whatever sufferings pain him, is by way of being chosen by Allah for testing. He was rewarded, however, in this world, before the other world. And Allah said "And the reward in the hereafter is better for those who had faith and were pious."

It is to be remembered, however, that the greatest calamity of Jacob was because of the disappearance of his beloved son Joseph. And Joseph had nothing to do with his absence. It is the intrigue of his brothers so as to secure the devotion of their father for themselves exclusively. They threw him in the well. Nothing of all that would

have taken place until Allah willed it. This was a sort of test from Allah to Jacob. When we consider the fact that Joseph's full brother did not return and the eldest as well, we understand how such distress revived the old wounds of Jacob which began to bleed again.

The blindness that deprived him of his eyesight was because of his continuous weeping for Joseph and not for the two other sons who did not return and were detained in Egypt because of Joseph's stratagem. It is known that Joseph stayed in Egypt although he could have returned to Al Sham before the coming of his brothers to him because he was messenger of Allah and a bearer of a trust. His sojourn in Egypt where he called for the worship of Allah and discarding the scattered Gods of Polytheism was more needed than his return to Al Sham where Jacob and his folk lived.

The meaning of this is that Joseph preferred struggle and agony to rest and being with his own folk and companions. When Allah permitted him to reveal his true identity, there was nothing worrying to him more than Jacob's distress. What he did for him was a mark of utmost piety and filial devotion. This is no surprise because it comes naturally from him.

When Jacob asked his sons to return in order to grope for Joseph and his brother, the sons are smitten dumb. No mention is made of the lie of Joseph's perishing or Joseph not being alive as they lied before. On the other hand, Jacob did not believe them when his grief was small, how would he believe them when his grief is mature and developed? Initially he was never really prepared to believe this pretence.

Perhaps the only way out left for the brothers is what their eldest suggested in his saying: Perhaps some caravan might pick him up. Allah said: One among them said: Kill not Joseph but if you must be doing; fling him into the depth of the pit, some caravan will find him. Other alternatives were discussed at that time.

Now they see the wisdom of their eldest brother. The probability that Joseph is still alive prevailed and is now strong. It could be the only assumption. Their hope in Allah's preserving Joseph alive must be present. Has not their father said "Do not despair of Allah's



compassion. Only the unbelievers despair of Allah's compassion." As if they were saying to themselves: We are Muslims and we submit to Allah, so how can we despair of his compassion. What are we going to do? How do we ask this question when our father, the Prophet of Allah says with clarity "Go and grope for Joseph and his brother."

The position of the brothers was like the position of the defendant who took what he has no right to take and finds himself before the Judge. The accused is now certain, after repeated denial, that he must bring back what he took without right. The Judge lets him do that without forcing him to make a verbal confession. So he releases him by bail to enable him to bring back what he took. He guides him unto the right path. He is encouraged to right the wrong he did.

In the case of Joseph's brothers, the motivating factor is their real concern for their aging ailing father whose health is deteriorating. The 'defendant' has submitted to undertake the grand scheme of searching throughout the land in order to restore the right to its rightful place. What is the meaning of this...one might ask? Its meaning is the implicit confession that the "defendant's" accusation is mostly true. It also implies their denial of their past statements after casting Joseph into the pit.

In the light of this changing attitude we cannot but feel sympathy for the nine brothers for their devotion to their father. Jacob's words concerning Benjamin's not returning, were according to the Quran: "Nay but your minds have beguiled you into something" This silences these devoted sons. They bear the unbearable by their silence. On the other hand they reckon in their innermost souls that they deserve to bear the unbearable because they were instrumental in Joseph's loss.

When Jacob asks them to grope for Joseph's and his brother's news they remain silent, out of a sense of guilt. This is in addition to the first public "confession" that they had something to do with Joseph's absence. And before whom? It is before the one most concerned...namely Jacob. This gradual return into the bosom of the filial piety from which they formerly deviated is a preparation for us for the expectation of Joseph's revelation of his true identity.

## The Third Journey of the Brothers to Egypt

Whither will the brothers go? Their father asks them to go but does not specify the direction. Can they go to grope for Joseph? And where is Joseph? And where is his brother? His brother is detained in Egypt. The governor of Egypt has always been kind to them. Their eldest brother was there too. Their need for food was still pressing. All these factors pointed to their direction. So they set off with the blessings of Allah.

After a very strenuous journey they arrived in Egypt and entered into the presence of the governor.

Allah said: "And when they came (again) before him (Joseph) they said: O Ruler! Misfortune has touched us and our folk and we bring but poor merchandise, so fill us the measure and be charitable unto us. Lo! Allah will requite the charitable. He said: Do you know what you did unto Joseph and his brother in your ignorance? They said: Is it indeed you who are Joseph? He said: I am Joseph and this is my brother. Allah has shown us favor. Lo! He who wards off evil and endures (finds favor) for verily Allah loses not the wages of the kindly. They said: By Allah verily Allah has preferred you above us and we were indeed sinful. He said: Have no recrimination this day! May Allah forgive you and He is the most merciful of those who show mercy."  
(Quran 12:88-91)

And thus Joseph revealed his true identity to his brothers and grasped their constraint before they even uttered a word.

They made a collective confession of their sin against him. But Joseph was too magnanimous to mention the matter. He did not blame them let alone punish them. This treatment by Joseph to his brothers is indicative of the fact that what they had done was something not inherent in their nature but a passing whim or mischief in which the devil played a role. They did deviate from the straight path but their noble nature restored them to it.

The psychological reprimand chosen by Joseph to teach them and

the fact that he was generous to them each time they came is proof that here we find a distinguished group of pious people who were led astray by Satan, Allah curse him.



## **Jacob and his folk move from Al Sham to Egypt**

Naturally, Joseph, who was kind to his brothers and revealed his identity, is even more kind and devoted to his father. Therefore no sooner had he conveyed the essential matter to his brothers than he was mindful of his father.

Allah said: "Go with this shirt of mine and lay it on my father's face, he will become (again) a seer and come to me all your folk."  
(Quran 12:93)

Here we find ourselves before two of Allah's Prophets who communicate with a rather special mode of communication. Joseph is cognizant by Allah's inspiration of the reality of his father's condition. Jacob in his turn, from the moment the caravan started moving including Joseph's shirt, was conscious of the breath of Joseph, his beloved son. As soon as the bearer of glad tidings laid it on his face, his eyesight was restored to him instantly. These are miracles for the Prophets of Allah, Jacob and his son Joseph.

When the folks of Jacob eventually approached Egypt, Joseph went out to meet his parents especially. Then he invited them all to enter the city. He placed his parents on the dais and they bowed to him in greeting and ennobling. They prostrated before him which was a fulfillment of the dream related at the beginning of the Surah.

In this last episode Joseph expresses words indicative of his great character, his gratitude to Allah and his humbleness.

Allah said:

"When the caravan departed their father had said: Truly I am conscious of the breath of Joseph though you call me dotard. Those around him said: By Allah Lo! You are in your old aberration."  
(Quran 12:94)

"Then when the bearer of glad tidings came, he laid it on his face and became a seer once more. He said: Said I not unto you that I know from Allah that which you know not?"

They said: O our father! Ask forgiveness of our sins for us, for lo! We were sinful. He said: I shall ask forgiveness for you of my Lord. Lo! He is the forgiving and the Merciful.” (Quran 12:96)

“And when they came in before Joseph, he took his parents unto him and said: Come to Egypt safe, if Allah wills! (Quran 12:99)

“And he placed his parents on the dais and they fell down before him prostrate and he said: O my father! This is the interpretation of my dream of old. My Lord has made it true and He has shown me kindness, since He took me out of the prison and has brought you from the desert after Satan has made strife between me and my brothers. Lo! My Lord is testing unto whom He will. He is the Knower, the Wise.” (Quran 12:100)

“O my God you have given me something of sovereignty and has taught me something of the interpretation of events...Creator of the Heavens and the earth. You are my Protector in this world and the hereafter. Make me to die submissive unto you and join me to the righteous.” (Quran 12:101)

### **Conclusion of the Story**

In the concluding Ayat the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) who was still in Makkah before his migration to Madina is addressed by Allah as follows:

“This is of the tidings of the invisible which we inspire in you. You were not present with them when they concocted their conspiracy and they were scheming.” (Quran 12:102)

It refers to the fact that all that is contained in the story is of the tidings of the unseen which has weight and value in human life. It came to the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) through divine revelation.

But what is the significance of the statement: You were not present with them when they concocted their conspiracy and they were scheming; which refers to one incident in particular while the story is



replete with numerous incidents and tidings? Obviously it singles out the consensus of Joseph's brothers to fling him in the pit.

Joseph was the core of the story from the beginning to the end. The alternative of casting him in the pit was one of three proposals presented and it was the one proposed by the eldest brother. This alternative is the cornerstone in Joseph's story. If Joseph had been killed or cast off in the wilderness to perish, the purport of the story stressed by the Ayat at the end of the Sura: "In their history, verily there is a lesson for men of understanding," would have been absent. The sequence of events serially and consequentially is meant to teach us lessons by illustrative examples.

It is worth mentioning that the brothers who flung Joseph into the pit swore secrecy. There is no occurrence in this story that was kept secret until revealed at the proper time except that one.

The Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) was inspired by this knowledge and the Ayat are meant to motivate people to think, to ponder and then to be persuaded which leads to faith. As Allah says:

"And Lo! It is a revelation of the Lord of the worlds, which the true spirit has brought down, upon your heart that you may be one of the warners in plain Arabic speech." (Quran 26:192-195)

This reminds us of another Ayat in a similar vein:

"And you (Muhammad) was not in the western side of the mountain when we expounded unto Moses the Commandment and you were not among those present. But we brought forth generations and their lives dragged on for them. And you were not a dweller in Madian, rehearsing unto them our revelation, but it is We (Allah) who send messengers with inspiration, nor were you at the side of the mount when We called (to Moses), yet you are sent as a mercy from your Lord that you may warn a folk unto whom no warner had come before you, that haply they may give heed and receive admonition." (Quran: 28:44-46)



And Allah's saying:

"You had no hope that the scripture would be inspired in you, but it is a mercy from your Lord so never be a helper to the disbelievers." (Quran 28:86)

And Allah's saying:

"And thus have We inspired in you a spirit of Our command. You knew not what the scripture was, nor what the faith. But We have made it a light whereby We guide whom We will of our bondman. And lo! You verily do guide unto a right path."  
(Quran 42:52)

And Allah's saying:

"This is of the tidings of things hidden, We reveal it unto you. You were not present with them when they cast lots with arrows as to which of them should be the guardian of Mary, nor were you present with them when they quarreled (thereupon)." (Quran 3:44)

And Allah's saying:

"This is of the tidings of the unseen which We inspire in you. You yourself knew it not, nor did your folk knew it before this. Then have patience. Lo! The sequel is for those who ward off evil."  
(Quran 11:49)

Since we have considered the concluding Ayat, it is permitted to consider its corresponding ones because of the integral relation between the two:

Allah said: "We narrate unto you the best of narratives in that We have inspired in you this Quran though aforetime you were of those who knew not, heedless." (Quran 12:3)

This aya evidences that what Allah narrated of the best of narratives is referred to by the Ayat. The use of the term "heedless" is very telling with the emphatic use in the arabic form *You were of*.

As an illustration, when Aysha, the mother of believers was falsely accused in the famous incident of falsification and slander, Allah sent down Quran in this connection.

“Lo! as for those who slander virtuous believing women (who are) careless, cursed are they in the world and the hereafter. Theirs will be an awful doom.” (Quran 24:23)

The significant meaning here is that the Prophet is initially inspired by the truth, and then through him the people came to know.

Narratives in the Quran play a significant role and occupy a meaningful position in its content and subject matter. It is known that the Prophet was opposed in Makkah after his call to Allah, with atrocious forces of evil and ignorance for thirteen years. Inspiration from Allah came down to him continuously to support and sustain him and to enforce this will and to solace him. Quranic narratives inspired him with relief and succour. Allah said:

“And all that We relate unto you of the stories of the messengers is in order that thereby We may make firm your heart. And herein has come unto you the truth as an exhortation and a reminder for believers.” (Quran 11:120)

The best of narratives included in the story of Joseph is most fulfilling to this objective concerning the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W). The story concerns two Prophets of Allah, namely Jacob and his son Joseph, both chosen and tested in adversity by Allah. They endured it with faithful patience and surrender to Allah’s will. They were amply rewarded in this world before the hereafter.

The moral purport of the story for the Prophet has a dual function. It inspires him with security and serenity. The sequel is for the pious. It emphasizes the interactive integrative process of faith in encountering the vicissitudes of life. The infidels of Makkah were not only disbelievers but they also tried to darken the light of Islam and to kill the Prophet of Islam and the new converts.



## The Concluding Portion

The thematic unity between the beginning Ayat of the Sura and the concluding Ayat integrates the sequence of events harmoniously and satisfies the artistic and religious requirements of the narrative.

Allah said:

“And though you try hard, most men will not believe. You asked them no fee for it. It is naught else than a reminder unto the peoples. How many a portent is there in the heavens and the earth which they pass by with face averted! And most of them believe not in Allah except that they attribute partners (unto him).  
(Quran 12:103)

“Deem they themselves secure from the coming on them of a pall of Allah’s punishment, or the coming of the hour suddenly while they are unaware? Say: This is my way. I call on Allah with sure knowledge, I and whosoever follows me—Glory be to Allah!—and I am not of the idolaters.”  
(Quran 12:107)

“We sent not before you (any messenger) save men whom We inspired from among the folk of the townships...Have they not travelled in the land and seen the nature of the consequence for those who were before them? And verily the abode of the hereafter for those who ward off evil is best. Have you then no sense?”  
(Quran 12:109)

“Till, when the messengers despaired and thought that they were denied, then came unto them our help and whom We would was saved. And Our wrath cannot be warded from the guilty.”  
(Quran 12:110)

“In this narrative, verily there is a lesson for men of understanding. It is no invented story nor concocted but a confirmation of the existing (scripture) and a detailed explanation of everything, and a guidance and a mercy for folk who believe.” (Quran 12:111)



The Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) is addressed by Allah in the above mentioned Ayat because he spared no effort to call the Makkans to Islam. He was grieved because the majority were heedless. Allah says to him:

“Yet it may be, if they believe not in this statement, that you will torment your soul with grief over their footsteps.” (Quran 18:6)

It is reported that Ibn Abbas said that the Makkans were specifically meant in this connection.

The Ayat refers to genuine faith not just submission. It is commonly known that every faithful is a Muslim but not vice versa. The Prophet (S.A.W.) was deeply concerned that the Makkans became faithful and not just Muslims. There is also mention of the fact that the majority of the people are heedless. Allah says:

“And if your Lord had willed, He verily would have made mankind one nation, yet they cease not differing...Save him on whom your Lord has mercy and for that He did create them. And the word of your Lord has been fulfilled: verily I shall fill hell with the Jinn and mankind together.” (Quran 11:118-119)

And the following Ayat:

“You do not ask of them a fee. It is only a reminder to the people” is connected with the former.

The Quran is a reminder from Allah with no cost to people...neither for the Makkans nor others.

The Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) is keen on their becoming faithful by believing what was inspired to him. There are many signs which are observable in the heaven and in the earth which prove what he is calling for, and yet they are heedless. They don't think. They don't inquire. Even those who believe that Allah is their creator and the creator of the heavens and the earth, there are many of them who associate other gods with Allah.

“Deem they themselves secure from the coming on them of a pall of Allah’s punishment, or the coming of the hour suddenly while they are unaware?”

Then, how dare these unbelievers do what they do? The Quran gives the answer:

“It is not their eyes that are blind, it is their hearts in their bosoms. Indeed it is not the eyes that grow blind, but it is the hearts which are within the bosoms that grow blind.” (Quran 22:45)

One would wonder why don’t they understand the saying of Allah?

“Say, this is my path, my directional process: I call to Allah with clarity and those who follow me. Glory be to Allah and I am not of the idolaters.”

This is the same message which Joseph advocated while in prison to the two prisoners:

“And I have followed the religion of my fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It never was for us to attribute aught as partner to Allah. This is of the bounty of Allah unto us (the seed of Abraham) and unto mankind, but most men are thankless.” (Quran 12:38)

Perhaps it is most relevant now to discuss the groups of Arabs during the time of the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.). They are classifiable into three groups:

1. The town dwellers like Makkah, Madina and Al Taif. They were more or less urbanized and more receptive of the call. At the beginning of the call it succeeded in Makkah to some extent and in Madina completely.
2. The bedouin Arabs who are the slowest to perceive and the fastest to revolt. Islam was resisted by them in its dawn with an endless series of atrocities. The Quran condemned some of them quite explicitly.



3. Those who are neither town dwellers nor nomadic Arabs. They combine the characteristic traits and values of both. Naturally, for the success of the call, Muhammad (S.A.W.) was chosen from the town folk who have acquired a refined taste of civilized style of life.

The clause "We inspire them" shows the means of communicating with messengers...namely divine revelation. At the beginning of the Sura we read:

"We narrate unto you the best of the narratives in that We have inspired in you this Quran." (Quran 12:3)

Also the clause in the ayat: "Were they to look throughout the earth and see the sequel of those who preceded them!" is directed to the idol worshippers of Makkah especially the traders to Yemen in winter and to Al Sham in summer.

In Sura "The Rankers" Allah says:

"You verily pass by (them) by day and night. Can't you understand?" (Quran 37:137-138)

Thinking is an integral part of the Islamic process. *Minding* is encouraged in the Quran in the sense of rational thinking rather than cognitive dissonance. Allah said in the Quran: "We have sent down Arabic Quran so that you think."

It is reported by Aysha that Bilal came to the Prophet for the morning prayer and found him weeping. He asked what brings tears to your eyes messenger of Allah? He replied: Why should I not weep and I was inspired tonight with the revelation:

"Lo! in the creation of the heavens and the earth and in the difference of night and day are tokens (of His Sovereignty) for men of *understanding*." (Quran 3:190)

Then the Prophet added: "Woe to the one who reads it and does not think."



Among the blessings of Allah for Muslims is the fact that rationality and Islamic faith are not mutually exclusive. The deeper the mind, and the more penetrating the more faithful the mindful becomes. There are many Ayat in the Quran making it incumbent on every Muslim to think, to inquire, to compare, to contrast, to analyze, to research.

Beyond every depth there are depths. Islamic religious faith and rational thinking are compatible. The faithful mind, to the degree that it is faithful follows religion and fulfills it.

The narratives in the story of Joseph deal with the choice of Prophets and their inspiration by divine revelation. They are also intended to instill in the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) solace and serenity in the face of the cognitive dissonance and vindictiveness of the Makkan idolaters. There is also promise for gaining the upper hand by the will of Allah. Allah says:

“(Respite will be granted) until when the messengers give up hope (of their people) and come to think that they were treated as liars, there reaches them Our help and those whom We will are delivered into safety but never will be warded off our punishment from those who are in sin.” (Quran 12:110)

The apparent meaning is that when messengers reach a state of almost despair in the infidels and begin to doubt the cherished hopes they harbored because of the incessant denials of their people and their heedlessness, Allah’s relief, and supportive aid came to them suddenly and quickly without introductions.

Here we find the folks of messengers classified into two categories according to their response to their call: Either they believe, and they are the ones meant in the ayat by: We save whomever We will. OR they deny and they are the ones meant in the ayat by “Our Wrath is not held from the disbelievers.”

The concluding ayat in Joseph’s story is a climax throwing light on the entire Sura in its scope, sequence and content:

Allah said:

“In their narratives verily there is a moral exhortation for men of



common sense.” “It is no invented story but a confirmation of the existing (scripture) and a detailed explanation of everything, and a guidance and a mercy for folk who believe.”  
(Quran 12:11)

The pronoun in *their* narratives refers to all who were mentioned in the story especially the Prophets and messengers of Allah.

In the best narratives which Allah gave to the Prophet through divine inspiration in this Sura and in other Suras as well, in eloquent Arabic, their moral lessons and illustrative examples are clear for those who have understanding to learn and to benefit from their purport.

The clause: “It is no invented story” proves that the revealed contents were solid facts which did actually take place. The remainder of the Ayat emphasizes that the Quran is a confirmation of the revealed books that came before it and before they were distorted. The Quran is the primary source and divine law on which the Sunna and the entire faith depend. “It is a guidance and a compassion for the believing folks.”

The most pervasive element in the Sura of Joseph is its thematic organic unity. But there is a major objective which the story seeks to attain...namely to solace the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) who suffered from the Makkans all sorts of persecution and malice. He was in need of reassurance. This was achieved in the first segment of the narrative, perhaps indirectly by the poetic justice and happy endings for all concerned. It also fulfilled its aim in the various indicative references to the recompense of the pious “The sequel is for the virtuous,” either upon the tongue of the personality involved as in Allah’s saying by Joseph:

“I have forsaken the religions (creeds) of folk who disbelieve in Allah and the hereafter. And I have followed the religion of my fathers, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob....

“It never was for us to attribute aught as partner to Allah. This is of the bounty of Allah unto us (the seed of Abraham) and unto

mankind, but most men are thankless..."

....or as explanatory comment on certain incidents as in Allah's saying after empowering Joseph with unbounded authority when appointed as governor and Treasurer of Egypt:

"Thus We gave power to Joseph in the land. He was the owner of it where he pleased. We reach with Our Mercy whom We will. We lose not the reward of the good. And the reward of the hereafter is better, for those who believe and ward off (evil)."  
(Quran 12:55-57)

The second segment of the narrative gave solace to the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) directly which is a logical development of the indirect approach and also necessary because the ultimate aim is the happiness of man in the two worlds, the here and the hereafter.

The first approach fulfilled its objective in a rhythmic narrative of beautiful musicality which penetrates the heart and stimulates the mind. The second approach, being a logical development of the first, satisfied both the rational and the emotional in a variation of rhythmic presentation which integrates the first approach with the second harmoniously with an aesthetic effect most appealing to the psychic yearnings of the self. This is one of the distinctive features of the Quran: this combination of the aesthetic component with the religious to the extent that the two are inseparable.

It is now time to discuss the *dramatis personae* (the characters of the narrative) in relation to the thematic unity of the story and in terms of the distinctive contribution of each to the organic unity pervasive in the theme.



## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **The Characters of the Narrative and Their Role In Fulfilling the Thematic Unity of the Story**

The characters in the story of Joseph are of different personality types and they vary according to the duration of their appearance on the scenes of the occurrences and the specific roles they perform in the totality of the story.

There are characters whose roles are permanent from the beginning to the end such as Joseph who constitutes the core around which the story revolves; and Jacob and the brothers to a lesser degree because of their absence in a number of episodes.

There are other characters whose roles are decisive in the story and occupy an important position secondary to the major ones. These vary in terms of the duration and incidence such as the caravan of travelers, the governor of Egypt and his wife, the witness, the women friends of the governor's wife, the two prisoners who were jailed with Joseph.

There are other characters with fleeting temporary roles such as those who proposed putting Joseph in prison until the matter blew over gradually. Allah says in this connection:

“And it seemed good to them after they had seen the signs of his innocence to imprison him for a time.” (Quran 12:35)

And such as the notables to whom the King had recourse as in Allah's saying:

“O notables! Expound for me my vision, if you can interpret dreams.” (Quran 12:43)

And such as the King's herald in Allah's saying:

“And when the messenger came unto him (Joseph) Joseph said: Return unto your lord and ask him what was the case of the women

who cut their hands. Lo! my Lord knows their guile.”  
(Quran 12:50)

And such as the young men in the service of Joseph. Allah says:

“He said unto his young men: PPlace their merchandise in their saddlebags, so that they know when they go back to their folk, and so will come again.” (Quran 12:62)

And such as the crier in Allah’s saying:

“And then a crier cried: O camel riders! Lo! You are surely thieves.” (Quran 12:70)

And such as the young boys who are referred to in Allah’s saying:

“They said: we have lost the King’s cup and he who brings it shall have a camel-load and I am answerable for it.” (Quran 12:72)

And such as the people of the township and the travellers referred to in Allah’s saying upon the tongue of the eldest brother:

“And ask the township where we were and the caravan with which we travelled hither. Lo! We speak the truth.”

And Jacob’s folk referred to in Allah’s saying:

“They said by Allah Lo! You are your old aberration.”

We shall discuss each of these important characters in the sequence of the narrative starting with the second category and after that we shall deal with the major ones.



*The characters of the second category in Joseph's story.*

## **The Caravan Travellers and Their Water Drawer**

Allah said:

“And there came a caravan and sent their water-drawer. He let down his pail into the pit. He said: Good luck! Here is a youth. And they hid him as a treasure, and Allah was aware of what they did. And they sold him for a low price, a number of silver coins, and they attached no value to him.” (Quran 12:19)

Obviously the caravan was composed of traders who used Joseph as a commodity for marketing. They sold him cheaply lest they should be asked where they got him from.

Allah willed that the buyer is the then governor of Egypt and no one else in spite of the fact that he was sold at a low price.

There is another observation here and that is that since the caravan sent one water drawer to the pit it must have been a caravan of limited number of people. However, there is no mention of the manner in which Joseph was raised from the pit. Apparently the pit was not very deep.

There is also mention of hiding Joseph as a treasure. The intention of the caravan people was to get rid of him without much fuss since he was young in age and size. It did not occur to them that the child is lost and must be returned to his folk.

## **The Governor of Egypt, His Wife and the City Women**

Allah said:

“And he (of Egypt) who purchased him said unto his wife: Receive him with hospitality perchance he may prove useful to us or we may adopt him as a son. And thus We established Joseph firmly in the land that We might teach him the interpretation of events. And

Allah has full power but most of mankind know not.”  
(Quran 12:21)

It seems from this ayat that the governor of Egypt was a noble, kind hearted man and rather far sighted and wise. He must have had many servants, slaves and concubines and yet he entrusts the boy to his own wife to look after him. He apparently was gifted with insight and intelligence to find in Joseph a special kind of person who deserves special treatment. He also hoped that in the future “we may adopt him as a son.” That followed “he may prove useful to us.” He combined the two considerations to stimulate the interest of his wife in that very special lad. The suggestion of the future adoption might mean that the governor and his wife were childless.

Now let us see how the wife handled the request of her husband. Has she treated him with generosity and honorably? Allah says:

“And when he reached his prime We gave him wisdom and knowledge. Thus We reward the good. And she, in whose house he was, asked of him an evil act of seduction. She bolted the doors and said: Come! He said: I seek refuge in Allah. Lo! He is my Lord, who has treated me honorably. Lo! Wrong-doers never prosper.”  
(Quran 12:22-23)

Allah, the exalted, testified that Joseph was pious to himself and others by avoiding the prohibited and obeying Allah’s commands. Consider the age and vitality of a youth exposed to such experience. Allah rewarded him by giving him wisdom and knowledge. A bachelor exposed to the wife of the governor in this critical stage of his life, is certainly put to a very challenging and trying test.

In the first reference of the Quran, Allah says:

“And she, in whose house he was...” (Quran 12:23-24)

The specific mention of the wife of the governor was uttered for the first time by the women of the city:

“And the women of the city said: The ruler’s wife is asking of her



slave-boy an ill-deed. Indeed he has smitten her to the heart with passion. We behold her in plain aberration.”  
(Quran 12:30)

It is worth mentioning here that the temptations were overwhelming. They were continuous and pressing. On the other hand the woman was a woman in a position of authority. And yet her seduction was met with resistiveness and escape from Joseph. The more resistive to her attempt, the more stubborn she was in the pursuit of her aim. She bolted the doors and the pressure was now direct and frank after the failure of all subtle or indirect attempts.

Joseph's reaction was according to Allah's saying:

“He said: I seek refuge in Allah. Lo! he is my Lord who has treated me kindly. Lo! wrongdoers never prosper.” (Quran 12:23)

And now let us consider the clause:

“She verily made desireous advances to him, and he would have desired her if it had not been that he saw the proof (argument) of his Lord. Thus it was that We might ward off from him evil and lewdness. Lo! he was of Our chosen worshippers.” (Quran 12:24)

Allah would not let down his faithful worshipper in this stressful situation running away towards the door trying to escape and save his religion. Allah says:

“And they raced with one another to the door and she tore his shirt from behind and they met her lord and master at the door. She said: What shall be his reward who wishes evil to your folk, save prison or painful doom?” (Quran 12:25)

Apparently the two were running at the same speed or at least the escaper's speed was equal to the follower's or chaser's speed. The tearing of the shirt from behind was proof of his innocence. It also meant that he was dressed because Allah wanted his faithful worshipper to be in the decorum suitable for a Prophet.

There are a number of valid observations in this connection worthy of mention. The woman was adamant in her pursuit of seducing Joseph. Joseph rushed to the door which was bolted from inside. The governor's appearance at that particular moment was quite unexpected by the wife. Joseph was aided by Allah in the whole matter. The woman's scheme was unsuccessful. It wounded her malicious pride and brought down her erotic pursuit to no avail.

To save her face and to avenge herself against Joseph she said to the husband instantly when the bolted door was opened suddenly, as reported in the Quran:

"What shall be his penalty who wishes evil to your household save prison or a painful doom?" (Quran 12:25)

We observe here that she stressed penalizing him as if the accusation is taken for granted. At the same time, realizing that he was absolutely innocent, she hastened to drive away the possible accusation to be directed against her. Her conscience was apparently in slumber.

The question she posed to her husband did not mention Joseph by name. It was in a generalized form to emphasize the penalty of the act regardless of the accused. We observe also that she preceded Joseph in complaint. Joseph's defense was very brief, as reported in the Quran:

"She, it was who asked me of an evil act." (Quran 12:26)

The truth was verified by Allah when the inquirer was assured of Joseph's innocence beyond any conceivable doubt. The testimony is given in the Quran as follows:

"So when he saw his shirt torn from behind, he said: Lo! This is of the guile of you women. Lo! The guile of you is great! O Joseph! Turn away from this, and you (O woman) ask forgiveness for your sin. Lo! You are of the sinful." (Quran 12:28)

Thus the matter was temporarily shelved because the governor's



wife was guilty and because Joseph was innocent.

It is worth mentioning here that the society in which Joseph found himself was not a religious one in the moral sense of the word. There were no divine laws to be applied in this case. This is seen in the reaction of the governor, the husband of the woman whose positive response to the matter was conspicuous by absence. Apparently he simply sneaked away and preferred "to get lost." Certainly he was positive about one thing...namely Joseph's innocence.

The news of the governor's wife behavior, or rather misbehavior reached the women folk of the city. They all condemned what she did. Allah says:

"And women in the city said: The ruler's wife is asking her slave-boy an ill-deed. Indeed he has smitten her to the heart with passion. We behold her in plain aberration." (Quran 12:30)

Naturally this Ayat (verse) refers to a certain class of women in the city and not to all women. There are a number of arguments to substantiate this assumption:

1. The group of women referred to were familiar to the household of the governor. This does not apply to the entire female population of the city.
2. The governor's wife is not concerned about the common folk. She has regard only for the women who belong, more or less, to her class. Therefore she gives a party to them.
3. The advisors who judged imprisoning Joseph, inspite of the evidence of his innocence and chastity, did that only under the influence of their own women. We are disinclined to believe that the governor's wife was adamant in imprisoning him. This is evident in her saying to the women about Joseph without any sense of shame as mentioned in the Quran:

"But if he does not my behest he verily shall be imprisoned and verily shall be of those degraded." (Quran 12:32)

A further observation in this connection is that this particular group

of women of the high class of the society were gossipists who derive pleasure from malicious spreading of malicious news. They were chatter boxes! Their accusation was focused entirely on the woman because she was the governor's wife and because her erotic pursuit was directed to her slave. Apparently they were well informed with the details. Their judgement was:

“We behold her in plain aberration.”

The response of the governor's wife to the women's judgement was described in the Quran as follows:

“And when she heard of their malicious talk, she sent for them and prepared for them a special kind of fruit that needs heavy-weighted cutting with a very sharp blade and gave everyone of them a knife and said to Joseph: Come out unto them! And when they saw him they exalted him and cut their hands, exclaiming: Allah blameless! This is not a human being. This is no other than some gracious angel!” (Quran 12:31)

Joseph came “out” to them in obedience to the order of the governor's wife. This sort of obedience did not conflict with his obedience to Allah. It is known that Joseph's beauty radiated like the full moon. In the Prophet's “hadith” about the night journey he related that he saw Joseph and was asked how did you find him? He replied: “Like the moon when it is a full moon.”

The women were awe inspired and exclaimed:

“This is not a human being. This is no other than some *gracious angel!*” (Quran 12:31)

The governor's wife was victorious in this round. She outsmarted the women and when she made sure that their “blame” was dissolved in this overwhelming appearance she said to them with a sense of justification:

“This is he on whose account you blamed me.” (Quran 12:32)



This was followed by a confession from her. Allah says: "I asked of him an evil act but he proved continent and resistive."

This is contrary to her attitude before her husband when she accused him. But, she does not stop there. She is still in pursuit of her consuming erotic desire. Allah says upon her tongue:

"But if he refuses to do my behest, he verily shall be imprisoned and verily shall be of those brought low."

The woman was confident of her power to impose their punitive measures on Joseph in spite of the fact that she confessed her guilt.

Joseph's answer was logical because of his fear of Allah privately and publicly, outwardly and inwardly. He preferred to be imprisoned rather than to disobey Allah. At the same time he prayed for God's support in this crisis. Allah says:

"He said: O Lord! Prison is dearer to me than unto which they urge me and unless you do not fend off their wiles from me, I shall incline unto them and become of the foolish." (Quran 12:33)

But a society with no sound faith, whose men are led astray by their women in many vital concerns, made its men decide to imprison Joseph until the rumors and gossiping die away. Allah says:

"And it seemed suitable to them (the men-folk) after they had seen the signs (of his innocence) to imprison him for a time."  
(Quran 12:35)

The sequence of events goes on according to Allah's divine plan of guidance and intervention. Two young men entered prison with Joseph. He interpreted their dreams for them. He asked the one whom he thought would be saved to mention him as a reminder to his lord the King. Allah willed that the cup-bearer of the King who was released from prison forgot, (through the devil), to mention Joseph to the King. So Joseph remained in prison for a few years. He could have remained there until his death but for Allah's compassion which willed that the King had a dream which no one could interpret. It was at this very



moment when the cup-bearer remembered his prison mate, Joseph, who had formerly interpreted his dream and it came true. The King summoned Joseph.

Joseph interpreted the King's dream and gave him the relevant advice and imparted to him what Allah taught him about the fifteenth year. The King was happy with the persuasive interpretation and wondered why Joseph was put in prison in the first instance. There must be a mystery surrounding this matter.

Before Joseph went to the King, he refused to go unless a condition was fulfilled. The condition was according to the Quran:

"Return to your master and ask him how it is with the women who cut their hands. My Lord knows all their cunning."  
(Quran 12:50)

The King starts an inquiry into the case. He is now knowledgeable of the situation with clarity. Allah says:

"He said (to the women): What have you to say about your tempting Joseph to commit adultery? They replied: God Almighty. We know no evil of him. The wife of the governor said: "Now the truth has been made clear and manifest I did tempt him to commit adultery with me. It was indeed he who was speaking the truth."  
(Quran 12:51)

Perhaps it is pertinent in this connection to ask why did the King address all the women in his inquiry and not just to the wife of the governor? Joseph's indications concerned all the women in his statement including the wife of the governor naturally. Allah says:

"He said: O my Lord prison is more dear to me than that unto which *they* urge from me. I shall incline unto them and become of the foolish unless you fend off their wiles from me. So his Lord heard his prayer and fended off their wiles from him. Lo! He is Hearer, Knower." (Quran 12:33)

Notice: their *wiles*. Notice also what Allah says upon Joseph's



tongue referring to the women in the plural form: "Allah is cognizant of *their wiles*." The implicit assumption here is that the women after cutting their fingers tried to tempt him one way or the other collectively either explicitly or indirectly.

This collective attitude by the women is followed by another collective attitude by the men when they, according to the Quran, decided to put him in prison.

"And it seemed suitable to them (the men-folk) after they had seen the signs (of his innocence) to imprison him for a time." (Quran 12:35)

Perhaps the King, out of tact or discretion addressed the group of women to avoid embarrassing the wife of the governor exclusively. But this seems to be a controversial matter.

One observation worth mentioning here is that the collective testimony of the women concerning Joseph is indicative of conscientious awakening. Thus the role of the women and the role of the governor's wife end at this point in the narrative. It seems a happy ending for all guilt feelings are now over.

Now we turn to another significant matter. Joseph said to the King:

"Set me over the storehouses of the land. Lo! I am a skilled custodian." (Quran 12:55)

Joseph nominates himself for the job and he becomes the *Aziz* of Egypt. Was the position of the governor who bought Joseph vacant? Did he resign from his office? Was he dead? All these matters have occupied the thinking of scholars. But the most important thing is that Joseph became now the governor of Egypt with full authority and responsibility for the conduct of state affairs.

## The Witness

Allah said in the Quran:

“And a witness of her own folk testified: if his shirt is torn from front, then she speaks the truth and he is of the liars and if his shirt is torn from behind then she has lied and he is of the truthful. So when he saw his shirt torn from behind he said: Lo! this is of the guile of you women. Lo! the guile of you is great. O Joseph! Turn away from this and you (O woman) ask forgiveness for your sin. Lo! You are of the sinful.” (Quran 12:29)

Allah willed that the witness belongs to her own folk. His testimony cannot be biased for Joseph. On the other hand the witness must be one of those who have the right of access to the household of the governor. The matter is delicately private and the witness seems to be one of those who have some close relation to the wife's folk.

His judgement directed the case to a decisive point. Allah endowed him with wisdom and justice. And yet deep in his heart he rushed to prove the woman's innocence because her innocence proves his guilt and his guilt proves her innocence.

He set two rules for the judgement and made it publicly known. When applied they proved Joseph's innocence irreversibly. When Joseph's innocence was established his accusation was in the plural form.

“This is of the guile of you *women*. Lo! the guile of you *women* is great.”

And yet Joseph was put in prison inspite of the evidence of his innocence. Joseph was instructed to turn away from this and the woman to ask for forgiveness for her sin.

The witness who gave the instructions favored the woman using his status not as a judge or governor but as someone who is respected in the household. In this respect, and after the proven guilt of the woman, it is obvious that the value-system of the society was not rooted in a sound faith.



## **The Two Young Men: Joseph's Prison Mates**

Allah said:

"And two young men went to prison with him. One of them said. I dreamed that I was pressing wine. The other said: I dreamed that I was carrying upon my head bread whereof the birds were eating. Announce unto us the interpretation for we see you of those who are good."

The first matter to concern us is the reason why the two young men were imprisoned. Did they deserve the penalty or were they innocent? Was the one who was released innocent and the other who was eventually executed guilty and deserved the penalty?

It is very difficult to answer such questions. However, the more important factor in the situation is that they were both young and the age level of Joseph which gave Joseph a sense of some sort of belonging in prison. Joseph was the kind of person who relates to people with kindness and empathy and so he gained their confidence with ease.

Allah willed that the two young men dreamt at the same time. Each one's dream was related to the work he served before being imprisoned. One was a cup bearer and the other was a baker. Joseph, by divine inspiration, interpreted the two dreams, as reported in the Quran:

"O my two fellow prisoners! As for one of you, he will pour out wine for his lord to drink, and as for the other, he will be crucified so that the birds will eat from his head. This is the case judged concerning which you did inquire." (Quran 12:41)

The interpretation of the dreams was fulfilled to the letter. The one who was crucified disappears from the scene of events forever. He is the only unfortunate character in the entire narrative because his end is tragic. He was also fortunate assuming that he embraced the religion of Islam before his death.



The cup bearer's innocence is announced and he is released from prison after Joseph had asked him to mention him to the King. Rapport has been established between the cup bearer and Joseph because Joseph's interpretation augured well for him. It happened that Allah's will made the cup bearer forget Joseph's request until after some years, the King's dream interpreters and advisors failed to interpret the King's dream. Just at this very moment, the cup-bearer remembers Joseph, not as a fellow prisoner but the one who interpreted the dreams. The Quran refers to this in detail:

"As he of the two who was released and (now) at length remembered, said: I am going to announce unto you the interpretation, therefore send me forth. And when he came to Joseph in the prison he exclaimed: Joseph! O You truthful one! Expound for us the seven fat kine which seven lean were eating and the seven green ears of corn and other seven dry, that I may return unto the people so that they may know." (Quran 12:45)

The cup bearer seems to be firmly confident that Joseph will solve the problem. He also derives a lot of satisfaction from his being instrumental in securing Joseph's interpretation as if he were himself the interpreter.

We must realize also that in the hierarchy of status the cup bearer's position was of no real significance even though he was very close to the King. The advisors of the King were unsuccessful in interpreting the King's dream and considered it jumbled dreams. The cup-bearer addresses Joseph as the truthful one, the man of veracity. The cup-bearer knows from experience that Joseph's interpretation of dreams is fulfilled to the letter. What the cup-bearer feared was not to find Joseph in prison for one reason or another.

There is another word used by the cup-bearer which is significant. He says: So that I may return to the people to tell them...to the people and not to the King. The matter has now become public and it concerns the people. When the interpretation of the dream by Joseph reaches the King, the role of the cup-bearer, the second young man, and fellow prisoner of Joseph, comes to an end.



## The King and his Notables

Allah says in the Quran:

And the King said: Lo! I saw in a dream seven fat kine which seven lean were eating and seven green ears of corn and other seven dry. O Notables! Expound for me my vision, if you can interpret dreams. They answered: Jumbled dream! And we are not knowing in the interpretation of dreams." (Quran 12:43)

The King's worry over the dream made him anxious to get an interpretation.

The notables took advantage of the King's use of the conditional if: *if you can interpret dreams*. On the other hand, it seemed to them that the dream is a bit ominous so why get implicated. Therefore they answered "jumbled dreams" as an escape tactic to avoid responsibility one way or another.

Joseph interprets the King's vision. The King must have inquired about Joseph and why he was imprisoned and why he remained in prison for many years. The answers given by the cup-bearer were incomplete. When the King is informed about Joseph he feels that there must be some mystery in his whole matter. How come that such a person with such lofty and noble qualities, be put in prison.

He inquires into the matter and conducts a thorough investigation. He summons Joseph. Allah says in the Quran:

"And the King said: Bring him unto me. And when the messenger came unto him, he (Joseph) said: Return unto your lord and ask him what was the case of the women who cut their hands. Lo! My Lord knows their guile. He (the King) then sent for those women and said: What happened when you asked an evil act of Joseph? They answered: God preserve us! We know no evil of him. The wife of the ruler said: Now the truth is manifest. I asked of him an evil act and he is surely of the truthful." (Quran 12:50)

Joseph refuses to leave prison and sends back the cup bearer with

this condition so that the truth would be clear.

The King conducts the investigation and Joseph's innocence is firmly established. The King not only expresses his gratitude to the innocent Joseph but also, as reported in the Quran:

"And the King said: Bring him unto me that I may attach him to my person. And when he had talked with him, he said: Lo! you are today in our presence established and trusted. He said: Set me over the storehouses of the land. Lo! I am a skilled custodian."  
(Quran 12:54)

The King's statement "that I may attach him to my person" reminds us of an earlier statement by the governor when he bought Joseph and said to his wife: "Treat him generously, we hope he would be useful to us or we adopt him as a son." Unfortunately, the misbehavior of the ruler's wife prevented that hope from eventuating into realization.

Let us now consider the quality of the impression of Joseph on the King: Allah says in the Quran:

"When he had talked with him he said, you are *today* in our presence *established* and *trusted*." (Quran 12:54)

Some commentators are inclined to argue that the King must have been led eventually to the right path through the influence of Joseph.

A comparison is made between the King's reaction and the Queen of Sheba in the story of Solomon to invalidate this argument because in the case of Sheba she said: "O God, I have oppressed myself and now I submit with Soloman to Allah, Lord of the worlds." Of course there is a marked difference in the characters of the two stories. Queen of Sheba in Soloman is a major character. The King of Egypt in Joseph plays a minor role.



## The Principal Characters in the Story of Joseph, Jacob and his Folk

The characters in the story which played the major roles in the story are: Jacob, his sons, and in particular Joseph. Some names are mentioned in the Quran, others are named in the books of exegeses such as Joseph's brother, mother and aunt. There are references in the Sura worth mentioning. In the Quran we read:

"Thus your Lord will prefer you and will teach you the interpretation of events and will perfect HIS grace upon you and upon the family of *Jacob*, as He perfected it upon your forefathers, *Abraham* and *Isaac*. Lo! Your Lord is Knower, Wise."  
(Quran 12:6)

Concerning Joseph's brothers the Quran pronounces:

"And when they came (again) before him (Joseph) they said: O ruler! Misfortune has touched us and our folk and we bring but poor merchandise. So fill for us the measure and be charitable unto us. Allah will requite the charitable." (Quran 12:88)

And the Quran says upon the tongue of Joseph:

"Go with this shirt of mine and lay it on my father's face, he will become (again) a seer, and come to me with all your folk."  
(Quran 12:93)

And the Quran says concerning those folk:

"(Those around him) said: By Allah, Lo! You are in your old aberration."

All the above mentioned persons played some role in the sequence of the narrative positively and negatively.

Joseph's mother was not mentioned by name but she must have been living because Allah says: "He placed his *parents* on the dais."  
(Quran 12:100)

## Preliminary Remark

All the major characters which played decisive roles within the folk of Jacob in Joseph's story are specified in the ayat:

"When Joseph said unto his father: O my father Lo! I saw in a dream eleven planets and the sun and the moon, I saw them prostrating themselves unto me." (Quran 12:4)

The dream was interpreted as follows: The eleven planets are the brothers. The sun is his father. The moon is his mother.

This means that Jacob had twelve sons. There is no mention that he had daughters. However, some exegesists said he did have one daughter. Some also assume that the twelve sons were born of four wives and the only full brother of Joseph was Benjamin and both were the youngest of all their brothers.

There was sibling rivalry in the family and jealousy especially of Joseph. In the Quran, Allah said upon the tongue of Jacob:

"He said: O my dear son! Tell not your brothers of your vision lest they plot a plot against you. Lo! Satan is for man an open foe." (Quran 12:5)

Naturally, the full brother of Joseph, Benjamin could not be included in this warning because he was the youngest and was too young to plot. Joseph was Jacob's favorite son. His vision was liable to stir the envy of his half brothers. His father advises him in a frank command not to relate his vision to his brothers. He gave him the command and the reasons for it because he was aware of the consequences.

This was the first and the last time for Jacob to tell Joseph not to impart to them what concerns him. One telling observation worth emphasis here is that the dream visioned by Joseph by its very content is indicative of Joseph's future significance religiously (as a Prophet) and in the conduct of world affairs as Treasurer and provider. Jacob felt deep in his heart that Joseph is chosen by Allah for fulfilling a



mission. Jacob took Joseph's dream seriously. It could not be jumbled dream inspite of Joseph's young age. Allah says:

"Thus your Lord will *prefer you* and will teach you the interpretation of events and will perfect His grace upon you and upon the family of Jacob as He perfected it upon your forefathers, Abraham and Isaac."

And thus Allah says upon the tongue of Jacob:

"His grace will be perfected upon you and upon the family of Jacob."

Is there anything more graceful or a blessing more perfected than prophethood...let alone when it is combined with rulership or kingship. The mention of Abraham in the ayat refers to his being blessed by safety from fire and by the perishing of his enemy Al Namerouz. The mention of Isaac refers to his being the forbear of the offspring of Jacob and his branches. The interactive process of the major characters is characterized by thematic unity. Joseph was prepared for the prophethood.

## Jacob and Joseph's brothers The conspiracy

Allah says:

“Verily in Joseph and his brothers are signs (of Allah’s sovereignty) for the inquiring. When they said: Verily Joseph and his brother are dearer to our father than we are, many though we may be. Lo! Our father is in plain aberration. One said: Kill Joseph or cast him to some other land, so that your father’s favour may be all for you, and that you may afterward be righteous folk. One among them said: Kill not Joseph but, if you must be doing, fling him into the depth of the pit, some caravan will find him.” (Quran 12:10)

The above mentioned ayat start with Allah’s signs for those who inquire about Joseph and his brothers. Then they show the brothers’ envy and their allegation against their father. We say allegation or false accusation because Jacob was a prophet and his treatment of his children must be fair to all. Joseph and his brother, being the youngest, received the natural treatment of the youngest in any family constellation because they need more care and attention.

They say: *Joseph and his brother*. In doing this we feel they are alienating them categorically. The pervasive atmosphere was one of envy grounded in misconception. To accuse their father of plain aberration is based on a fallacious assumption. On the other hand, the plot of the brothers was confined against Joseph and not his brother. The two proposals presented to get rid of Joseph indicate a pervasive hostility element in varying degrees among the brothers. Later on this matter of degree will be reflected in the eldest brother who was retained with the full brother Benjamin as hostages.

*However, Joseph’s brothers are not pure evil*. Although the plot is extremely malicious yet it contains some seed of subtle goodness. Their ultimate objective, after getting rid of Joseph is: and that you may afterward be *righteous folk*.

The proposal of killing Joseph was discarded instantly in preference to the alternative of flinging him in the pit. One might argue that



killing and flinging into the pit are both killing except that one is direct and the other indirect. But, one can also argue that the flinging in the pit in preference to casting him off in the wilderness is not meant to be slow death or indirect killing. Allah says:

“One among them said: Kill not Joseph, but if you must be doing, fling him into the depth of the pit, *some caravan will find him.*”  
(Quran 12:10)

Inherent in this suggestion is Joseph's survival and not his death. Caravans were the order of the day in those times. It was not a deserted dry well. On the other hand it must have been on the main trodden track of the caravans. So Joseph will not perish. He will survive.

There is another point worth stressing here. Allah says in the Quran:

“Then when they led him off and were of one mind that they should place him in the depth of the pit, we inspired in him: (You will tell them of this deed of theirs when they know you not.)”  
(Quran 12:15)

There is a distinction in Arabic between the verb to place and the verb to throw him into. The attempt of the brothers has been modified. The eldest brother's stance was certainly instrumental in this modification. However, we cannot absolve the eldest brother completely from being guilty and from responsibility.

One hastens to ask: Couldn't he have told his father of his brothers' intention to get rid of Joseph? But one does not hesitate to realize that even if he had told Jacob, could Jacob himself stop the brothers from their pre-planned plot? Perhaps they could have become more stubborn and ruthlessly scheming. Perhaps they would have decided to get rid of the eldest brother as well. The truth of the matter is that Joseph's eldest brother was confined to a range of passive jealousy and silence concerning the decision of his brothers to fling Joseph into the pit. The acceptance of his proposal by the brothers could be explained as a consensus by all concerned with some distinction in his role as



compared with the other nine brothers.

The brothers urge Jacob to send Joseph with them in order to carry out the plot. Allah says in the Quran:

“They said: O our father! Why will you not trust us with Joseph when Lo! We are good friends to him? Send him with us tomorrow that he may enjoy himself and play and have fun. And Lo! We shall take good care of him. He said: Lo! in truth it saddens me that you should take him with you and I fear lest the wolf should devour him while you are heedless of him. They said: If the wolf should devour him when we are (so strong a band) then surely we have already perished.” (Quran 12:11, 12, 13, 14)

It is obvious that the brothers' arguments were not expressed by one of them only but by more than one with the possible exception of the eldest. This is substantiated by a later ayat in which Allah says upon his tongue:

“The eldest of them said: Know you not how your father took a pledge from you in Allah's name and how you failed in the case of Joseph aforetime?” (Quran 12:80)

One can imagine Jacob's response to the brothers' audacity in their arguments especially in their saying: “Why will you not trust us with Joseph?” The inference applies to the past as well as the present and certainly it will extend to the future. They seem to be blaming the father for his obvious favoritism.

Joseph must have kept his vision a secret from his brothers as instructed by his father. Jacob, being a prophet, knows that Joseph's dream will be fulfilled. Joseph will be elevated to a religious and worldly status of greatness. And yet Jacob expressed his fears without shame of being human. His consent was neither clear cut approval nor decisive disapproval. Being a prophet he expressed his innermost soul quite frankly. On the other hand, being human he combined both certainties and uncertainties. When his sons said “If the wolf should devour him when we are so strong a band, then surely we have already perished”...they felt that their father had penetrated their hearts which



Satan had overcome temporarily. They closed all the doors of argument before their father. They seem to have disarmed the old man. They pursue their course. Allah says in the Quran:

“Then when they led him off and were of one mind that they should *place* him in the depth of the pit, *we inspired* in him: (You will tell them of his deed of theirs when they know you not.)”  
(Quran 12:15)

The brothers' false excuse was actually invented from the very fear advanced by their father. They took off Joseph's shirt and smeared it with false blood and the shirt was not torn by the teeth of the wolf, an observation made by Jacob, though not explicitly mentioned in the Quran. *The shocking news reaches Jacob.* Allah says in the Quran:

“And they came weeping to their father in the evening....O father we went racing with one another and left Joseph with our things And the wolf devoured him. But you will never believe us even though we tell the truth. They stained his shirt with false blood. He said: Nay but your minds have concocted a tale (That may pass with you) For me patience is most fitting and appropriate against that which you assert. It is Allah alone whose help can be sought.”  
(Quran 12:16-18)

We notice that they returned when it was dark because darkness helps to conceal the expressions on their faces and to create the impression intended by their hypocritical weeping.

We notice also that they had the audacity to tell their father that the wolf had devoured Joseph in spite of their previous assertion that “we are so strong a band, then surely we have already perished.” Allah says: “They stained his shirt with false blood.” The description of blood with false is a form of overcharge because they wanted to cheat Jacob that it is Joseph's blood. Jacob's reply was commensurate with the attitude they expected he would take. He started with the conjunction: Nay which indicates a negation of what precedes it and an affirmation of what follows it.