

SŪRAH 12

Yūsuf (Joseph)

Prologue

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

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

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

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

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

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

Trials in Plenty

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

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

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

A Hint of Future Prospects

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

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

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

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

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

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

Artistic Narrative

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

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

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

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

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

Realism and Consistency

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

environment leaves its clear impressions on their way of thinking, feelings and traditions. They know that they need some sort of justification so as to reduce the ghastliness of their crime:

Surely in Joseph and his brothers there are signs for those who inquire. They said [to one another]: 'Truly, Joseph and his brother are dearer to our father than we, even though we are many. Surely our father is in manifest error. Kill Joseph, or cast him away in some faraway land, so that you have your father's attention turned to you alone. After that you will [repent and] be righteous people.' One of them said: Do not kill Joseph, but rather – if you must do something – cast him into the dark depth of this well. Some caravan may pick him up.' [Thereupon] they said [to their father]: 'Father, why do you not trust us with Joseph, when we are indeed his well-wishers? Send him with us tomorrow, that he may enjoy himself and play. We will certainly take good care of him.' He answered: 'It certainly grieves me that you should take him with you; and I dread that the wolf may eat him when you are heedless of him.' They said: 'If the wolf were to eat him when we are so many, then we should surely be lost.' And when they went away with him, they resolved to cast him into the depth of the well. We revealed [this] to him: 'You will tell them of this their deed at a time when they shall not know you.' At nightfall they came to their father weeping, and said: 'Father, we went off racing and left Joseph behind with our belongings, and the wolf devoured him. But you will not believe us even though we are saying the truth.' And they produced his shirt stained with false blood. He said: No, but your minds have tempted you to evil. Sweet patience! It is to God alone that I turn for support in this misfortune that you have described.' (Verses 7-18)

We subsequently see them reflecting the same characteristics on every occasion, just as we see one of them always adopting a different stance. Later on, to comply with Joseph's demand, they take his brother to him, not knowing Joseph's true identity but aware only that he is the Chief Minister of Egypt. They only want to buy their supply of grain from him during that period of drought. God, however, allows Joseph to retain his brother under the pretext of finding the King's measure in his luggage. The other brothers had no idea how this had come about, but their old grudges against Joseph immediately surface: *"They said: 'If he has stolen – well, a brother of his had stolen previously.' Joseph kept his secret to himself revealed nothing to them, saying [within himself]: 'You are in a far worse position, and God knows best what you are speaking of'" (Verse 77)*

Their old grudges manifest themselves again when they tell their father, now an old and sorrowful man, about the second calamity. They realize how this second event will renew all his grief for Joseph. Again, their old grudges against their lost brother are seen at full strength. They pay little heed to their father's old age and his

sense of bereavement: *“He then turned away from them and said: ‘Oh, woe is me for Joseph!’ His eyes became white with grief and he was burdened with silent sorrow. They said: ‘By God, you will continue to remember Joseph until you wither away or until you are dead.’”* (Verses 84-85)

The same may be said about their remarks when Joseph sent his shirt to his father after having identified himself to them. When they saw their father detecting Joseph’s aura, they were upset as this indicated the profound relationship that still existed between father and absent son. They were quick to remonstrate with their father and reproach him: *“As the caravan set out, their father said [to the people around him]: I feel the breath of Joseph, though you will not believe me.’ They replied: By God! You are still lost in your old illusions.”* (Verses 94-95)

Realism and Propriety

The Chief Minister’s wife is another character that reflects consistency in all situations. We see her first in the grip of desire, heeding nothing as she tries to satisfy her uncontrolled lust. She is restrained neither by feminine shyness, self respect, social position nor by a potential family scandal. She is quick to employ all her female guile and craftiness in order to show herself free of blame and at the same time protect her loved one, at whom she deliberately levelled a false accusation. Her aim here is that he should be given a mild sentence that spares his life. Again her guile helps her to answer other women’s accusations, utilizing their similar weakness against sexual desire. When her own lack of control is exposed, she owns up to her determination to get what she wants, declaring this to the other women who share with her the same lust that sees nothing wrong in satisfying carnal desires.

Although the story paints this type of woman realistically and faithfully, showing the moment of uncontrolled desire at its most urgent, the Qur’ānic account, which provides the best example of Islamic artistry, maintains a very clean line throughout. Even in the description of a woman exposing her physical and mental nakedness, the Qur’ān steers away from the squalor of explicit eroticism which characterizes what is called realism in literary works of contemporary societies that pay little regard to religious values.

The man from Egypt who bought him said to his wife: Be kind to him. He may well be of use to us, or we may adopt him as our son.’ Thus We established Joseph in the land, and We imparted to him some understanding of the real meaning of statements. God always prevails in whatever be His purpose; though most people may not know it. And when he attained his full manhood, We bestowed on him wisdom and knowledge. Thus do We reward those who do good. She in whose house he was living tried to seduce him. She bolted the doors and said, ‘Come.’ He said: ‘God protect me. Goodly has my

master made my stay here. Those who do wrong come to no good.’ She truly desired him, and he desired her. [He would have succumbed] had he not seen a clear sign from his Lord. Thus We averted from him evil and indecency. He was truly one of Our faithful servants. And they both rushed to the door. She tore his shirt from behind. And at the door they met her husband. She said: ‘What ought to be the punishment of someone who had evil designs on your wife other than that he should be thrown in prison or some grievous punishment. ‘[Joseph] said: It was she who sought to seduce me.’ One of her own household testified: If his shirt has been torn from the front, then she is speaking the truth and he is lying. But if it has been torn from behind, then she is lying, and he is speaking the truth.’ When [her husband] saw that Joseph’s shirt was torn from behind, he said to her: ‘This is indeed [an instance] of the guile of you, women. Your guile is awesome indeed.’ Joseph, let this pass! And you, woman, ask forgiveness for your sin. You have been seriously at fault.’ In the city, women were saying: ‘The Chief Minister’s wife is trying to seduce her slave boy, as she is passionately in love with him. We see that she is clearly going astray.’ When she heard of their malicious talk, she sent for them, and prepared for them a sumptuous repast, and handed each one of them a knife and said [to Joseph]: ‘Come out and present yourself to them.’ When they saw him, they were amazed at him, and they cut their hands, exclaiming: ‘God preserve us! This is no “mortal man! This is none other than a noble angel.’ Said she: ‘This is he on whose account you have been blaming me! Indeed I have tried to seduce him, but he guarded his chastity. Now, however, if he does not do what I bid him, he shall certainly be thrown in prison, and shall indeed be humiliated. ‘ [Joseph] said: My Lord, I would sooner be put in prison than comply with what they are inviting me to do. Unless You turn away their guile from me, I may yield to them and lapse into folly.’ His Lord answered his prayer and warded off their guile from him. It is He alone who hears all and knows all. (Verses 21-34)

We meet her again after Joseph had been a prisoner for years as a result of her and the other women’s scheming. It was only when the King experienced his dream that Joseph’s former fellow prisoner remembered that Joseph was the only one who could unravel a true interpretation of dreams. When the King ordered that he should be brought to him, Joseph refused until the King had investigated his case to determine his innocence. The King thus called the Chief Minister’s wife and the other women. As she responds, we see her again as a woman in love, even though time, aging and events have left their mark on her. But we also realize that faith, which she had observed with Joseph, found its way into her heart. *“The King said: ‘Bring this man before me.’ But when the [King’s] envoy came to him, Joseph said: ‘Go back to your lord and ask him about the women who cut their hands. My Lord has full knowledge of their guile.’ The King asked [the women]: ‘What was the matter with you when you tried to seduce Joseph?’ The women said: ‘God save us! We did not perceive the least evil on his part.’ The Chief Minister’s wife said: Now has the truth come to light. It was I who tried to seduce him.*

He has indeed told the truth. From this he will know that I did not betray him behind his back, and that God does not bless with His guidance the schemes of those who betray their trust. And yet, I am not trying to claim to be free of sin. Indeed man's soul does incite him to evil, except for those upon whom God has bestowed His mercy. My Lord is Much-Forgiving, Merciful.'" (Verses 50-53)

Joseph, a goodly type of man, is painted faithfully. The Qur'ān does not alter the slightest feature of his character. Having been brought up in a prophet's home as very religious, he is shown as a young man facing the trial of temptation. Indeed, his real character combines his natural human tendencies with his religious upbringing. When the woman tempted him openly, he almost responded to her, but the other influence saved him from falling into her trap. He felt his own weakness as he faced the women's guile coupled with the pull of his environment and the social milieu. But he remained steadfast. There is no distortion of his character. He is faithfully painted.

Then we have the very special character of the Chief Minister, who has to balance the dignity of his position with the weakness of pride. With him, social pretences and covering up what is unbecoming are essential characteristics: *"When [her husband] saw that Joseph's shirt was torn from behind, he said to her: 'This is indeed [an instance] of the guile of you, women. Your guile is awesome indeed!' Joseph, let this pass! And you, woman, ask forgiveness for your sin. You have been seriously at fault.'"* (Verses 28-29)

We also see the women in that society: their gossip about the Chief Minister's wife and her slave boy whom she tries to seduce; their disapproval of her conduct based on jealousy rather than the error involved; their infatuation with Joseph; their feminine cognition of the reason behind the conduct of the woman at the centre of their gossip; her awareness of this recognition prompting her to complete confession feeling completely safe to do so; their collective attempt to seduce Joseph despite their immediate recognition of his purity: *"When they saw him, they were amazed at him, and they cut their hands, exclaiming: 'God preserve us! This is no mortal man! This is none other than a noble angel.'"* (Verse 31) We understand all this from Joseph's prayer: *"He said: My Lord, I would sooner be put in prison than comply with what they are inviting me to do. Unless You turn away their guile from me, I may yield to them and lapse into folly."* (Verse 33) It was no longer his mistress that was after him, but the whole array of upper class women.

The whole social environment is clearly seen in the way Joseph's fate is determined even though his innocence is fully established. In this way, the decision was taken to suppress the social scandal, even though a wholly innocent person was made a scapegoat: *"Yet for all the evidence they had seen, they felt it right to put him in jail for a time."* (Verse 35)

The Development of Joseph's Character

If we follow Joseph across the whole story, we find his character shining throughout, reflecting its essential characteristics in every environment he finds himself in. He is a God-fearing young man brought up in a prophet's home where he acquired his faith. At no point do we see him losing sight of any of these elements. In the dark hours when he is unjustly thrown into prison, he continues to advocate his faith gently but firmly, aware of his environment and knowing how to approach people in such an environment. He realizes that he must always reflect the superiority of his faith by his conduct which maintains high moral standards and values:

Two young men went to prison with him. One of them said: I saw myself [in a dream] pressing wine.' The other said: And I saw myself [in a dream] carrying bread on my head, and birds were eating of it.' 'Tell us the meaning of these dreams, for we can see that you are a man of virtue.' [Joseph] answered: 'Your food which is provided for you will not have come to you before I have informed you of the real meaning of [your dreams]. That is part of the knowledge which my Lord has imparted to me. I have left the faith of people who do not believe in God, and who deny the truth of the life to come. I follow the faith of my forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is not for us to associate any partners with God. This is part of God's grace which He has bestowed on us and on all mankind, but most people do not give thanks. My two prison companions! Which is better: [to believe] in diverse lords, or to believe in God, the One who holds sway over all that exists? Those you worship instead of Him are nothing but names you and your fathers have invented, and for which God has given no sanction from on high. All judgement rests with God alone. He has ordained that you should worship none but Him. This is the true faith, but most people do not know it. My two prison companions! One of you will give his lord wine to drink. The other will be crucified, and the birds will eat from his head. The matter on which you have sought to be enlightened has thus been decided.' (Verses 36-41)

Nevertheless, he is a man with normal human weaknesses. He is eager that the King be informed of his case, hoping that the King would uncover the plot that ended with him being unjustly imprisoned. But God wanted to teach him to place his hopes in Him alone. "And [Joseph] said to the one whom he believed would be released: 'Remember me in the presence of your lord.' But Satan caused him to forget to mention Joseph to his lord, and so he remained in prison for several years." (Verse 42)

We see the same personality again after the lapse of several years. During which time Joseph has gone through the divine educative process and has placed his full trust in God, reassured about his future and fate. The King has his dream and his

nobles and religious leaders cannot find a suitable interpretation for it. At this point, the released former prisoner remembers Joseph and obtains his interpretation of the King's dream. The King orders that Joseph be brought to him. But Joseph is reassured, confident of his position. He refuses to leave prison until his case is properly investigated and he is acquitted:

And the King said: I saw [in a dream] seven fat cows being devoured by seven emaciated ones, and seven green ears of wheat next to seven others dry and withered. Tell me the meaning of my vision, my nobles, if you are able to interpret dreams.' They replied: 'This is but a medley of dreams, and we have no deep knowledge of the real meaning of dreams.' At that point, the man who had been released from prison suddenly remembered [Joseph] after all that time and said: I will tell you the real meaning of this dream, so give me leave to go.' 'Joseph, man of truth, tell us of the seven fat cows being devoured by seven emaciated ones, and seven green ears of wheat next to seven others dry and withered, so that I may return to the people [of the court], and that they would come to know.' He replied: 'You shall sow for seven consecutive years, but let the grain you harvest remain in its ear, except for the little which you may eat. 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. Then after that there will come a year of abundant rain, in which the people will be able to press [oil and wine]. The King said: 'Bring this man before me.' But when the [King's] envoy came to him, Joseph said: 'Go back to your lord and ask him about the women who cut their hands. My Lord has full knowledge of their guile.' The King asked [the women]: 'What was the matter with you when you tried to seduce Joseph?' The women said: 'God save us! We did not perceive the least evil on his part.' The Chief Minister's wife said: Now has the truth come to light. It was I who tried to seduce him. He has indeed told the truth. 'From this he will know that I did not betray him behind his back, and that God does not bless with His guidance the schemes of those who betray their trust. And yet, I am not trying to claim to be free of sin. Indeed man's soul does incite him to evil, except for those upon whom God has bestowed His mercy. My Lord is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. And the King said: 'Bring him before me. I will choose him for my own.' And when he had spoken to him, the King said: 'You shall henceforth be in a position of high standing with us, invested with all trust.' Joseph replied: 'Give me charge of the store-houses of the land. I am able to look after them with wisdom.' (Verses 43-55)

Here we see that Joseph has matured. He is fully aware of what goes on around him. He is calm, confident, reassured. From this point onward, he is the central character in the story, while the King, the Chief Minister, the women and the whole set up move out of stage. The *sūrah* prepares us for this change with a couple of verses: "Thus did We establish Joseph in the land, free to do what he willed. We bestow Our

mercy on whom We will, and We never fail to give their reward to those who do good. But as for those who believe in God and keep away from evil, the reward of the life to come is much better indeed.” (Verses 56-57) From this point onward, Joseph faces new types of trial, unlike those he had hitherto faced. In all these, he loses nothing of his calmness or reassurance.

First we see Joseph encountering his brothers for the first time after their crime against him. Now however he is far superior to them and in a stronger position. Yet his actions reflect his self control: *“Joseph’s brothers arrived and presented themselves before him. He immediately knew them, but they did not recognize him. And when he had given them their provisions, he said: ‘Bring me that brother of yours from your father’s side. 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.’ 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 58-62)

We meet Joseph again carrying out a plan sanctioned by God to detain his brother. With this we see a mature and wise person, one who is full of confidence and self control:

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.’ 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 boy 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 69-79)

Once more we see Joseph when the trial had taken its toll on Jacob and God has willed that the trials that engulfed him and his household should now come to an end. Joseph is now longing to be reunited with his parents, and he feels sympathetic towards his brothers who appear before him suffering hardship. He gently remonstrates with them as he identifies himself to them, and follows this with total forgiveness stated at the most opportune moment. All circumstances lead to such forgiveness which is the only attitude to be expected from Joseph, the God-fearing, mature, kind and reassured person.

When they presented themselves before [Joseph] again, they said: ‘Exalted one! Hardship has befallen us and our people, and so we have brought but little merchandise. Give us our full measure [of grains], and be charitable to us. Indeed God rewards those who are charitable. ‘He said: Do you know what you did to Joseph and his brother, when you were still unaware?’ They said: ‘Why – is it indeed you who are Joseph?’ He replied: ‘I am Joseph, and this is my brother. God has indeed been gracious to us. If one remains God-fearing and patient in adversity, God will not fail to reward those who do good.’ They said: By God. Most certainly has God raised you high above us, and we were indeed sinners.’ He replied: None shall reproach you today. May God forgive you. He is indeed the Most Merciful of those who show mercy. Now go and take this shirt of mine and lay it over my father’s face, and he will recover his sight. Then come back to me with all your family.’ (Verses 88-93)

We finally see him at the climax, when the reunion takes place, Joseph is at the height of his power, his dream has come true and all his aspirations have been fulfilled. At this moment, he steps aside to be alone addressing a prayer of complete devotion and full humility. His position of power means nothing to him at that moment: *“My Lord, You have given me power and imparted to me some understanding of the real meaning of statements. Originator of the heavens and the earth! You are my guardian in this world and in the life to come. Let me die as one who has surrendered himself to You, and admit me among the righteous.” (Verse 101)*

Joseph’s character reflects his integrity, consistency and the environment in which he was raised.

The Bereaved Father

Another character is Jacob, the loving kindly father and confident prophet who experiences a combination of apprehension and hope when his son tells him of his

dream. He recognizes that the dream heralds a very promising future, but he fears at the same time that Satan might prompt his other children to take some undesirable action. We see him here reflecting on all aspects of his character: *“Joseph said to his father: ‘Father, I saw in a dream eleven stars, as well as the sun and the moon; I saw them prostrate themselves before me.’ My son,’ he replied, do not relate your dream to your brothers, lest they plot some evil against you. Satan is indeed man’s open enemy. Even thus will your Lord make you His chosen one, and will impart to you some understanding of the real meaning of statements. He will perfect His favour to you and to the House of Jacob, as He perfected it to your forefathers, Abraham and Isaac. Your Lord is certainly All-Knowing, Wise.”* (Verses 4-6)

We then meet him again as his sons try to persuade him to let them take Joseph with them, followed by them giving him the shocking news of Joseph’s disappearance:

[Thereupon] they said [to their father]: ‘Father, why do you not trust us with Joseph, when we are indeed his well-wishers? Send him with us tomorrow, that he may enjoy himself and play. We will certainly take good care of him. ‘He answered. ‘It certainly grieves me that you should take him with you; and I dread that the wolf may eat him when you are heedless of him.’ They said: ‘If the wolf were to eat him when we are so many, then we should surely be lost.’ And when they went away with him, they resolved to cast him into the depths of the well. We revealed [this] to him: ‘You will tell them of this their deed at a time when they shall not know you.’ At nightfall they came to their father weeping, and said: ‘Father, we went off racing and left Joseph behind with our belongings, and the wolf devoured him. But you will not believe us even though we are saying the truth.’ And they produced his shirt stained with false blood. He said: No, but your minds have tempted you to evil. Sweet patience! It is to God alone that I turn for support in this misfortune that you have described.’ (Verses 11-18)

Again we meet him, in all his humanity, when his sons are trying once more to persuade him to part company with another son, Joseph’s full brother, now the focus of all his love and kindness. For them, they must get Jacob’s consent that the brother travel with them, because the Egyptian Chief Minister, whose identity is unknown to them, requires his presence in order to give them their full measure of grain.

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.’ He replied: Am I to trust you with him in the same way as I trusted you with his brother in the past? But God is the best of guardians; and of all those who show mercy He is the Most Merciful.’ 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. We will buy provisions for our people, and we will take good care of our brother. We will receive an extra camel-load: that should be an easy load.' 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.' When they had given him their solemn pledge, [Jacob] said: 'God is witness to all that we say. '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.' 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. (Verses 63-68)

We meet him again after his second calamity, to see him once more as a bereaved father and a reassured prophet. Joseph carried out his plan sanctioned by God to detain his brother. But another of Jacob's sons, who stands out as one with a special character that distinguishes his attitude at different junctures in the story, decides to stay behind as well. He cannot face his father after having given him a solemn pledge that he could not now honour. Therefore, he decides to stay until his father gives him permission to do otherwise, or until God has judged in his case:

When they despaired of [moving] him, they withdrew to begin earnest consultations among themselves. The eldest of them said: Do you not recall that your father took from you a pledge in God's name, and that previously you were at fault with respect to Joseph? I shall not depart from this land until my father gives me leave or God judges for me. He is certainly the best of judges.' Go back to your father and say: 'Father, your son has stolen. We testify only to that which we know. We cannot guard against the unforeseen. You may ask the [people of the] town where we were, and the caravan with which we travelled. We are certainly telling the truth.' He said: 'No, but your minds have tempted you to evil. Sweet patience! God may well bring them all back to me. He is All-Knowing, Wise.' He then turned away from them and said: 'Oh, woe is me for Joseph!' His eyes became white with grief and he was burdened with silent sorrow. They said: By God, you will continue to remember Joseph until you wither away or until you are dead.' He said: It is only to God that I complain and express my grief. For I know of God what you do not know. My sons, go and seek news of Joseph and his brother; and do not despair of God's mercy; for none but unbelievers can ever despair of God's mercy.' (Verses 80-87)

In the last episode of his long trial we see Jacob, the old man, demonstrating the

same characteristics, holding Joseph's shirt and recognizing his son's odour. He is being reproached by his sons, but his trust in his Lord is never in doubt. "As the caravan set out, their father said [to the people around him]: I feel the breath of Joseph, though you will not believe me.' They replied: By God! You are still lost in your old illusions.' But when the bearer of good news arrived [with Joseph's shirt], he laid it over his face; and he regained his sight. He said: Did I not say to you that I know from God something that you do not know?' [His sons] said: 'Father, pray to God to forgive us our sins, for we were sinners indeed.' He said: 'I shall pray to God to forgive you. He is certainly Much-Forgiving, Most Merciful.'" (Verses 94-98)

The Carnal and the Sublime

The Qur'ānic approach of faithfully painting reality while maintaining the values of purity and propriety is not limited to the sketching of human characteristics. It is also clearly seen in the faithful narration of events, showing them as they took place, accurately outlining their circumstances, background, time and place. Every movement, feeling, reaction and indeed every word is given at the appropriate time. All this is similarly true of the characters painted.

Even sexual feelings and attitudes are given their full space, within the limits of the clean approach that suits man. We see no falsification, distortion or suppression of the human reality, its scope or integrity. However, giving these moments their proper space in relation to the rest of events does not mean focusing on them as if they were the total reality of humans and the pivotal element in their life. This is contrary to the un-Islamic or *jāhiliyyah* approach which wants us to believe that only such focus produces realist art.

Jāhiliyyah deforms man under the pretext of artistic realism. It zooms in on sex as if it were the entire object of human life, making of it a deep swamp surrounded by tempting but evil flowers. It is not faithfulness to reality that makes *jāhiliyyah* adopt this approach to sex. It is done because the Zionist Protocols encourage it. These Protocols want to see man stripped of all values except the animal and carnal, so that the Zionists are not seen as the only people who shed all nonmaterial values. They want humanity to fall into the quagmire of sex, directing all its potentials to it. This is the surest way to destroy humanity and make it prostrate before the approaching Zionist Kingdom. They make art their means to bring about all this evil. In addition, they try hard to propagate new doctrines, exploiting them in such a way that serves the same purpose, while they maintain that such doctrines are 'scientific'. Examples of these are Darwinism, Freudianism, Marxism and Scientific Socialism. All these share in common the purpose of serving evil Zionist designs.

Historical Dimension

The story does not only relate events and draw characters. It goes beyond this to point out the period in history when these events took place, and describes its general features. Thus the stage acquires an international historical dimension. We will briefly refer to some of these.

Egypt was not ruled at the time by pharaohs of Egyptian descent. It was instead under the rule of a nomadic people who had learnt something about the divine faith from Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac and Jacob who lived nearby. We deduce this from the fact that the ruler of Egypt at the time is given in the Qur'ān the title of King, while the ruler of Egypt in the story of Moses is given the well-known Egyptian title, Pharaoh. This distinction determines the time when Joseph was in Egypt, namely between the 13th and 17th dynasties, which belonged to the nomads whom the Egyptian people called the Hyksos. This was said to be a derogatory appellation which referred to pigs or pig farmers. Their rule in Egypt lasted about one and a half centuries.

Joseph was sent as a Messenger of God during this period. He started his advocacy of Islam, in its broader sense, which means the religion of absolute monotheism, whilst in prison. We see him there making it clear that it was the faith of his ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and giving an accurate outline of what it meant: *“I have left the faith of people who do not believe in God, and who deny the truth of the life to come. I follow the faith of my forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is not for us to associate any partners with God. This is part of God’s grace which He has bestowed on us and on all mankind, but most people do not give thanks. My two prison companions! Which is better: [to believe] in diverse lords, or to believe in God, the One who holds sway over all that exists? Those you worship instead of Him are nothing but names you and your fathers have invented, and for which God has given no sanction from on high. All judgement rests with God alone. He has ordained that you should worship none but Him. This is the true faith, but most people do not know it.”* (Verses 37-40)

This is a very clear and comprehensive picture of Islam, as preached by all God’s messengers. It outlines the essential beliefs, including belief in God, the Day of Judgement, God’s oneness without entertaining any thought of associating partners with Him, a clear understanding of God’s attributes, the One, the Overpowering. It also involves a declaration that none other than God has any power, which entails that the deities given control over people have no such status. All power and authority belongs to God alone who has commanded that all worship be addressed to none other than Him. To exercise power, authority and lordship is to demand worship from people, which is contrary to God’s order that all worship be dedicated to Him. It defines worship as being subject to authority, rule and lordship, while the true faith is to acknowledge that all worship and rule are God’s own. In this sense,

the two are synonymous: *“All judgement rests with God alone. He has ordained that you should worship none but Him. This is the true faith.”* (Verse 40) This is the clearest, most comprehensive, accurate and perfect description of Islam.

It is also clear that when Joseph held the reins of power in Egypt, he continued to advocate the divine faith. There is no doubt that this faith spread in Egypt by his efforts, particularly because he did not merely hold power but also controlled people’s food provisions. It must also have spread into neighbouring areas, as they sent some of their people to Egypt to buy grains which had been stored there through Joseph’s wise policies. As the story describes, Joseph’s brothers came from the land of Canaan with caravans that brought provisions from Egypt. This shows that the drought affected the whole area at that time.

Early in the story there are hints at some vague influence of the divine faith which the Hyksos were aware of. The first reference occurs in quoting what the women said when they were surprised by Joseph’s appearance: *“When they saw him, they were amazed at him, and they cut their hands, exclaiming: ‘God preserve us! This is no mortal man! This is none other than a noble angel.’* (Verse 31) A similar indication is seen in the Chief Minister’s counsel to his wife: *“Joseph, let this pass! And you, woman, ask forgiveness for your sin. You have been seriously at fault.”* (Verse 29) Further reference is made later by the Chief Minister’s wife who clearly appears to have believed in Joseph’s religion and declared her submission to God: *“The Chief Minister’s wife said: ‘Now has the truth come to light. It was I who tried to seduce him. He has indeed told the truth.’ From this he will know that I did not betray him behind his back, and that God does not bless with His guidance the schemes of those who betray their trust. And yet, I am not trying to claim to be free of sin. Indeed man’s soul does incite him to evil, except for those upon whom God has bestowed His mercy. My Lord is Much-Forgiving, Merciful.”* (Verses 51-53)

Since the monotheistic faith was known in Egypt before Joseph assumed power, it must have subsequently spread during his reign and in subsequent Hyksos dynasties. When the Pharaohs of Egypt regained power with the 18th dynasty, they began to suppress the monotheistic faith and its adherents, particularly Jacob’s descendants, in order to reinstate the idolatry that gave the Pharaohs their authority.

This explains a major cause behind the persecution of the Children of Israel. Israel’s, i.e. Jacob’s, sons settled in Egypt and ruled it during the Hyksos period. When the Egyptians expelled the Hyksos, they persecuted their allies, the Children of Israel. But the conflict between the two faiths is in fact the prime reason for such persecution, because the spread of the monotheistic faith destroys the very basis of Pharaohs’ rule, since it stands firmly against all tyranny.

There is a reference to this elsewhere in the Qur’ān, when it relates the argument of a believer from Pharaoh’s household as he defended Moses, trying hard to

persuade Pharaoh and his people to leave Moses alone. Pharaoh felt that his very rule was threatened by the monotheistic faith Moses preached:

A believing man of Pharaoh's family, who had concealed his faith, exclaimed: 'Would you slay a man merely because he says, 'My Lord is God' – seeing that he has brought you all evidence of this truth from your Lord? Now if he be a liar, his lie will fall back on him; but if he is speaking the truth, a part at least of what he warns you is bound to befall you. God would not grace with His guidance one who is a lying transgressor. My people! Yours is the dominion today, and you have the upper hand in the land. But who will rescue us from God's punishment, should it befall us?' Said Pharaoh: I but point out to you that which I see myself and I would never make you follow any path but that of rectitude.' The man who had attained to faith said: My people! I fear for you the like of what had befallen those others who were leagued together [against God's truth], the like of what happened to Noah's people, the `Ād, the Thamūd and those who came after them. God never wishes any injustice for His servants. And, my people, I fear for you that day when people will cry out to one another, when you will turn your backs and flee, having none to defend you against God. For he whom God lets go astray can never find any guide. In times gone by, Joseph had come to you with all evidence of the truth; but you never ceased to throw doubt on all that he brought you; and when he died you said: "No messenger will God send after him." Thus God lets go astray a transgressor who is lost in doubt; those who call in question God's revelations, with no authority vouchsafed to them. Exceedingly abhorrent is [their conduct] in the sight of God and of the believers. Thus God sets a seal on every arrogant, self-exalting heart.' (40: 28-35)

Thus we see that the true conflict was between the monotheistic faith which acknowledges Godhead and lordship as belonging to God alone and the idolatrous faith that gave the Pharaohs the basis of their power.

Perhaps the distorted version of monotheism associated with Akhenaton was a confused version of the lingering influence of the divine faith advocated by Joseph (peace be upon him) in Egypt. This could be seen more so if historical reports to the effect that Akhenaton's mother was Asian, and not of Pharaohnic descent.

The story is not confined to Egypt. It accurately reflects the historical period, with the related dreams and predictions spread across a wider area. We see this clearly reflected first in Joseph's dream and its fulfilment at the end, as also in the dreams of the two prisoners, and then the King's dream. All these dreams receive due attention from those who experience or hear them, which is an indication of the prevalent culture at the time.

Artistic elements in the story are varied and plenty. It is rich with the human element, reflected in the feelings and movements described. The narrative clearly

highlights all these. Moreover, the Qur'ānic mode of expression is always inspiring, using varying rhythms to suit the particular atmosphere of every situation.

A father's love is clearly seen in varying degrees. We see it in Jacob's love of Joseph, his brother and also in his love for the rest of his sons. His love is also reflected in the way he reacts to events involving Joseph, from the beginning of the story up to its last line.

We also see envy and jealousy between brothers born to different mothers, according to how they see their father's love expressed. The way these feelings surface also varies, with some of the brothers entertaining murder while others, aghast at the thought of such a crime, advise instead that a much less impacting scheme should be sufficient.

Another prominent trait is that of plotting and scheming. Joseph's brothers plot to get rid of him, while the Chief Minister's wife's plots target Joseph, her husband and the women who gossip against her.

Desire and sex are described, as also the different responses to these. Here we see an unrestrained drive as well as self control. Appeal and fancy on the one side and chastity and restraint on the other. Other feelings and emotions are expressed such as regret, forgiveness and delight at the reunion of long lost family members. The *sūrah* also paints some aspects of the upper class of the then *jāhiliyyah* society: at home, in prison, at the market-place and in government offices in Egypt. Other aspects of the Hebrew society are also drawn, with emphasis on dreams and prophecies.

The story begins with the dream related by Joseph to his father who tells him that he will have a great role to play, but urging him to withhold his dream from his brothers so that their jealousy does not motivate them to scheme against him. The story then proceeds as though it is a realization of the dream, fulfilling Jacob's warnings. When the dream is finally fulfilled the story is ended, unlike what the writers of the Old Testament did. It thus has an artistic closure making it serve its religious purpose fully.

A clear plot adds to the artistic aspect of the story. The fulfilment of the dream is withheld to the end, even though it unfolds little by little. At the end, the plot is explained most naturally.

The story is divided into sections, each relating a number of episodes and scenes, leaving gaps between them to be filled in by the reader. In this way, it increases the story's appeal and entertainment.

We may finally say that the story shows the way for future literary works that benefit from fine artistic features and remain faithful to reality, without indulging in any vulgarity that is unbecoming to human art.

Moral Lessons

For the Islamic movement, the story provides clear lessons, some of which are particularly relevant to certain stages of its progress, while others answer clear permanent needs. In addition, certain facts are established through the story and within the *sūrah* as a whole, particularly in its final comments. We will briefly refer to some of these.

We have already mentioned that the revelation of this *sūrah* and the story it narrates were particularly suited to the critical period the Islamic message went through in Makkah, and the hardship endured by the Prophet and his few followers. This is manifested through the relation of the trials endured by Joseph, a noble brother of Muḥammad, God's Messenger, and how he had to depart from his land until he was given power elsewhere. This gives us an aspect of the moral of the story which fits in with the needs of the Islamic message at that particular time. We thus have an insight into the action-oriented nature of the Qur'ān, as it explains the nature of the message and gives the Muslim community practical directives with clear and well defined objectives.

In our analysis of the story, we have also referred to the clear, detailed and accurate picture of the divine faith, Islam, drawn by Joseph (peace be upon him). This picture merits long reflection. It begins by establishing the unity of the faith based on full submission to God and preached by all God's messengers. We see that the basic elements of this faith are incorporated in full in every message. They are all based on perfect monotheism, emphasizing God's oneness and His Lordship of mankind, who must submit themselves completely to Him alone. This faith, in all its messages, also establishes the essential belief in the life to come. This is contrary to what is known as the study of Comparative Religion which alleges that humanity began to believe in the One God and in the hereafter only at a very late stage in human history, after having gone through different forms of idolatry and dualism. It also alleges that progress in the field of religion mirrors human progress in science and industry. Thus, Comparative Religion implies that all religions were the product of man, like science and industry.

The *sūrah* also affirms the nature of the divine faith advocated by all God's messengers. It is not confined to the oneness of Godhead, but it also includes the oneness of Lordship. All judgement in all human affairs belongs to God alone, as a result of the divine order that only God may be worshipped. The Qur'ānic statement gives a very precise definition of worship. Judgement belongs to God and people must submit to His judgement. This is indeed the true faith, and not any other form or set of beliefs. No form of worship is valid when people submit to anyone other than God even in a single matter of the whole life spectrum. To believe that God is

One means, necessarily, that the Lord is One, and in practice this means that all judgement belongs to Him, and all worship is dedicated to Him alone. The two are synonymous. The sort of worship that classifies people as Muslims or non-Muslims means submission to God and implementing His judgement, to the exclusion of anything else. This definitive Qur'ānic statement should end all argument on this issue.

Another impression that the story radiates shows pure and dedicated faith that fills the hearts of two of the noble and chosen servants of God, Jacob and Joseph. We have already spoken about Joseph's final attitude as he turns to his Lord in all humility, discarding all worldly things and addressing Him in total devotion: *"My Lord, You have given me power and imparted to me some understanding of the real meaning of statements. Originator of the heavens and the earth! You are my guardian in this world and in the life to come. Let me die as one who has surrendered himself to You, and admit me among the righteous."* (Verse 101)

But this final attitude is not the only one sketched in the story. Indeed throughout his life Joseph remains close to his Lord, responding to Him and doing His bidding. When he is the target of seduction, being made very tempting offers, he says: *"God protect me. Goodly has my master made my stay here. Those who do wrong come to no good."* (Verse 23) And when he fears that he may weaken before the temptation, he prays: *"My Lord, I would sooner be put in prison than comply with what they are inviting me to do. Unless You turn away their guile from me, I may yield to them and lapse into folly."* (Verse 33)

Similarly, when he identifies himself to his brothers, he does not forget to acknowledge God's grace and express his gratitude for it: *"They said: 'Why – is it indeed you who are Joseph?' He replied: I am Joseph, and this is my brother. God has indeed been gracious to us. If one remains God-fearing and patient in adversity, God will not fail to reward those who do good.'" (Verse 90)*

All these attitudes go beyond answering the particular needs of the Islamic message in its early period in Makkah. They answer its needs in all situations at all times.

With Jacob the truth of God appears close and profound in every situation and on every occasion. As the trial deepens, this truth becomes still clearer in his heart and more sublime. At the beginning, when Joseph relates his vision, he reminds his son of God and expresses his gratitude to Him: *"Even thus will your Lord make you His chosen one, and will impart to you some understanding of the real meaning of statements. He will perfect His favour to you and to the House of Jacob, as He perfected it to your forefathers, Abraham and Isaac. Your Lord is certainly All-Knowing, Wise."* (Verse 6) As he is given the first blow with Joseph's disappearance, he appeals to his Lord, saying: *"Your minds have tempted you to evil. Sweet patience! It is to God alone that I turn for support in*

this misfortune that you have described.” (Verse 18)

We see him speaking to his sons as a loving father fearing that some misfortune should befall them. He recommends them not to make their entry into the city from the same gate, but to use different gates. However, he clearly states that such a precaution would avail them nothing against God’s will. The only judgement that is certain to take effect is God’s. Yet his recommendation may answer a need he feels within himself: *“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)*

He suffers another bereavement in his old age, when he had grown weak and sorrowful. But at no time does he ever lose hope that God will turn in His mercy to him: *“He said: No, but your minds have tempted you to evil. Sweet patience! God may well bring them all back to me. He is All-Knowing, Wise.” (Verse 83)*

This truth reaches its most sublime as his sons reproach him for his continued sorrow for Joseph, to the extent that he loses his eyesight through crying. He tells them that he knows God as they do not know Him. Hence, he addresses his complaint to Him only and hopes for nothing other than God’s grace: *“He then turned away from them and said: ‘Oh, woe is me for Joseph!’ His eyes became white with grief and he was burdened with silent sorrow. They said: By God, you will continue to remember Joseph until you wither away or until you are dead.’ He said: ‘It is only to God that I complain and express my grief. For I know of God what you do not know. My sons, go and seek news of Joseph and his brother; and do not despair of God’s mercy; for none but unbelievers can ever despair of God’s mercy.’” (Verses 84-87)* He again reminds them of the truth he feels deep in his heart about God of whom he knows what they do not know. *“As the caravan set out their father said [to the people around him]: ‘I feel the breath of Joseph, though you will not believe me.’ They replied: By God! You are still lost in your old illusions.’ But when the bearer of good news arrived [with Joseph’s shirt], he laid it over his face; and he regained his sight. He said: Did I not say to you that I know from God something that you do not know?” (Verses 94-96)*

It is a glittering picture of how God’s truth fills the hearts of the chosen among God’s servants. This picture generates impressions that suit the period of hardship suffered by the Muslim community in Makkah, but it also shows the fundamental truth of faith to everyone who advocates Islam at any future time.

Suitable Comments

The first comment the *sūrah* makes in its final passage that follows the long story shows the absurdity of the Quraysh’s denial of the truth of revelation with a

statement based on the history related in this *sūrah*. It states that the Prophet was not present when the events of this history took place: *“That is an account which We have now revealed to you, speaking of things that have been beyond your perception. You were not present when they [i.e. Joseph’s brothers] resolved upon their plans and completed their schemes.”* (Verse 102) This comment ties up with the introductory one at the beginning of the *sūrah*: *“In revealing this Qur’ān We relate to you the best of narratives. Before it you were among those who are unaware [of revelation].”* (Verse 3)

The introductory statement thus dovetails with the end one to form a picture of the truth. In this way it also counters the objections and denials raised.

This is followed with a comforting message to the Prophet so that he does not give those who deny his message undue importance. It shows how stubbornly they refuse to consider the signs that God has placed all around them in the universe. These signs are sufficient to alert human nature to the truth of faith and make it listen to the divine message and accept the evidence confirming it. They are threatened with God’s punishment which could take them unawares: *“Yet however strongly you may desire it, most people will not believe. You ask no recompense from them for it. It is but God’s reminder to all mankind. Yet many are the signs in the heavens and the earth which they pass by, paying no heed to them. And most of them do not even believe in God without also associating partners with Him. Do they feel confident that the overwhelming scourge of God’s punishment will not fall upon them, or that the Last Hour will not come upon them suddenly, taking them unaware.”* (Verses 103-107) These verses deliver some fundamental truths about people who do not believe in the true divine faith. This is particularly noted in the statement: *“And most of them do not even believe in God without also associating partners with Him.”* (Verse 106) This is a true description of many people who have not formulated a true concept of God’s oneness, allowing faith to be confused with unfaith.

At this point, the *sūrah*, with strong rhythm and decisive clarity, calls on the Prophet to define his way, showing it to be clearly distinguished from all others: *“Say: ‘This is my way. I call [all mankind] to God on the basis of sure knowledge, I and all those who follow me. Limitless is God in His glory. I am not one of those who associate partners with Him.’”* (Verse 108)

The *sūrah* concludes with another telling comment, explaining the value of giving historical accounts in the Qur’ān for the Prophet and the small band of believers who follow him. The comment also provides solace and reassurance to the believers, together with a promise of better things to come. The unbelievers who persist with their unbelief are also given reminders and warnings. A further assurance is given to both believers and unbelievers of the truth of revelation to the Prophet who only tells the truth. It reasserts the truth of his message: *“Even before your time, We only sent [as messengers] men to whom We gave Our revelations, choosing them from among their people.”*

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

Effective Harmony

It is useful at the end of this Prologue to the *sūrah* relating Joseph’s story to highlight some aspects of the fine harmony that runs throughout the *sūrah*, citing some of its finer examples.

- This *sūrah* follows the same pattern of the Qur’ān when certain words and expressions are often repeated to contribute to the general atmosphere and character of the *sūrah*. For example, here knowledge is mentioned very frequently, while ignorance is mentioned on several occasions:

Even thus will your Lord make you His chosen one, and will impart to you some understanding of the real meaning of statements. He will perfect His favour to you and to the House of Jacob, as He perfected it to your forefathers, Abraham and Isaac. Your Lord is certainly All-Knowing, Wise. (Verse 6)

Thus We established Joseph in the land, and We imparted to him some understanding of the real meaning of statements. God always prevails in whatever be His purpose; though most people may not know it. (Verse 21)

And when he attained his full manhood, We bestowed on him wisdom and knowledge. Thus do We reward those who do good. (Verse 22)

His Lord answered his prayer and warded off their guile from him. It is He alone who hears all and knows all. (Verse 34)

[Joseph] answered: ‘Your food which is provided for you will not have come to you before I have informed you of the real meaning of [your dreams]. That is part of the knowledge which my Lord has imparted to me. I have left the faith of people who do not believe in God, and who deny the truth of the life to come.’ (Verse 37)

They replied: ‘This is but a medley of dreams, and we have no deep knowledge of the

real meaning of dreams. (Verse 44)

Joseph, man of truth, tell us of the seven fat cows being devoured by seven emaciated ones, and seven green ears of wheat next to seven others dry and withered, so that I may return to the people [of the court], and that they would come to know.’ (Verse 46)

The King said: ‘Bring this man before me.’ But when the [King’s] envoy came to him, Joseph said: ‘Go back to your lord and ask him about the women who cut their hands. My Lord has full knowledge of their guile.’ (Verse 50)

From this he will know that I did not betray him behind his back, and that God does not bless with His guidance the schemes of those who betray their trust. (Verse 52)

Joseph replied: ‘Give me charge of the store-houses of the land. I am able to look after them with wisdom.’ (Verse 55)

He was endowed with knowledge which We had given him. But most people do not know it. (Verse 68)

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.’ (Verse 73)

You are in a far worse position, and God knows best what you are speaking of (Verse 77)

When they despaired of [moving! him, they withdrew to begin earnest consultations among themselves. The eldest of them said: Do you not recall that your father took from you a pledge in God’s name?’ (Verse 80)

We testify only to that which we know. (Verse 81)

God may well bring them all back to me. He is All-Knowing, Wise. (Verse 83)

He said: It is only to God that I complain and express my grief. For I know of God what you do not know.’ (Verse 86)

He said: ‘Do you know what you did to Joseph and his brother, when you were still unaware?’ (Verse 89)

He said: 'Did I not say to you that I know from God something that you do not know?' (Verse 96)

My Lord, You have given me power and imparted to me some understanding of the real meaning of statements. (Verse 101)

This is certainly a clear example of how harmony is maintained in this glorious book.

- The *sūrah* also explains some of the attributes of Godhead, notably judgement. This occurs once quoting Joseph in the sense of people being subject to God and willingly obeying Him. It occurs again quoting Jacob in the sense of people's involuntary submission to God's will. The two aspects thus are mutually complementary in defining the concept of judgement and Godhead. There is no chance that this could have been mere coincidence.

Joseph first states within the context of refuting the claims of Egypt's rulers that they were deities, explaining that this runs against the concept of God's oneness: *"My two prison companions! Which is better: [to believe] in diverse lords, or to believe in God, the One who holds sway over all that exists? Those you worship instead of Him are nothing but names you and your fathers have invented, and for which God has given no sanction from on high. All judgement rests with God alone. He has ordained that you should worship none but Him. This is the true faith."* (Verses 39-40)

Within the context of God's will and that it will always be done with no force able to stop it, Jacob says: *"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)

The complementarity in the significance of judgement means that faith is not set on the right footing unless submission to God's will in matters of judgement is equated with submission to His will in matters of fate. Both are aspects of faith. Voluntary submission is as much part of faith as submission to what is determined by God's will, giving man no say in it.

- We see another fine example when Joseph, wise, sagacious and astute as he is, chooses the most suitable of God's attributes when he speaks of a situation that reflects God's gracious handling of all affairs: *"And he raised his parents to the highest place of honour, and they fell down on their knees, prostrating themselves before him. He said: 'Father, this is the real meaning of my dream of long ago. My Lord has made it come true. He has been gracious to me, releasing me from prison, and*

bringing you all from the desert after Satan had sown discord between me and my brothers. My Lord is gracious in whatever way He wishes. He is All-Knowing, truly Wise.” (Verse 100)

- As we mentioned earlier, harmony is shown in the complementarity of the story’s introduction, the immediate comment after it has been told in full, and the final long comments that follow. All these confirm the same issues given at the beginning and at the end.

1

A Favourite Child Is Lost

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.

Alif Lām. Rā. These are the verses of the Book that clearly shows [the truth]. (1)

We have revealed it as a discourse in Arabic so that you may understand. (2)

In revealing this Qur'an We relate to you the best of narratives. Before it you were among those who are unaware [of revelation]. (3)

Joseph said to his father: 'Father, I saw in a dream eleven stars, as well as the sun and the moon; I saw them prostrate themselves before me.' (4)

'My son,' he replied, 'do not relate your dream to your brothers, lest they plot some evil against you. Satan is indeed man's open enemy. (5)

الرَّ تِلْكَ آيَاتُ الْكِتَابِ الْمُبِينِ ﴿١﴾

إِنَّا أَنْزَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ

﴿٢﴾

لَحْنٌ نُقِصُّ عَلَيْكَ أَحْسَنَ الْقَصَصِ بِمَا

أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ هَذَا الْقُرْآنَ وَإِنْ كُنْتَ

مِنْ قَبْلِهِ لَمِنَ الْغَافِلِينَ ﴿٣﴾

إِذْ قَالَ يُوسُفُ لِأَبِيهِ يَا أَبَتِ إِنِّي رَأَيْتُ

أَحَدَ عَشَرَ كَوْكَبًا وَالشَّمْسَ وَالْقَمَرَ

رَأَيْتُهُمْ لِي سَاجِدِينَ ﴿٤﴾

قَالَ يَبْنِي لَا تَقْصُصْ رُءْيَاكَ عَلَيَّ

إِحْوَاتِكَ فَيَكِيدُوا لَكَ كَيْدًا إِنَّ الشَّيْطَانَ

لِلْإِنْسَانِ عَدُوٌّ مُبِينٌ ﴿٥﴾

Even thus will your Lord make you His chosen one, and will impart to you some understanding of the real meaning of statements. He will perfect His favour to you and to the House of Jacob, as He perfected it to your forefathers, Abraham and Isaac. Your Lord is certainly All-Knowing, Wise.’ (6)

Surely in Joseph and his brothers there are signs for those who inquire. (7)

They said [to one another]: ‘Truly, Joseph and his brother are dearer to our father than we, even though we are many. Surely our father is in manifest error. (8)

Kill Joseph, or cast him away in some faraway land, so that you have your father’s attention turned to you alone. After that you will [repent and] be righteous people.’ (9)

One of them said: ‘Do not kill Joseph, but rather — if you must do something — cast him into the dark depths of this well. Some caravan may pick him up.’ (10)

وَكَذَلِكَ تَجْتَبِيكَ رَبُّكَ وَيُعَلِّمُكَ مِنْ تَأْوِيلِ الْأَحَادِيثِ وَيُتِمُّ نِعْمَتَهُ عَلَيْكَ وَعَلَىٰ آئَالِ يَعْقُوبَ كَمَا أَتَمَّهَا عَلَىٰ أَبَوَيْكَ مِنْ قَبْلُ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْحَاقَ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ عَلِيمٌ

حَكِيمٌ ﴿٦﴾

﴿٧﴾ لَقَدْ كَانَ فِي يُوسُفَ وَإِخْوَتِهِ آيَاتٌ

لِّلسَّالِبِينَ ﴿٧﴾

إِذْ قَالُوا لِيُوسُفُ وَأَخُوهُ أَحَبُّ إِلَيْنَا مِمَّا نَحْنُ غُصْبَةٌ إِنَّ أَبَانَا لَفِي ضَلَالٍ

مُبينٍ ﴿٨﴾

أَقْتُلُوا يُوسُفَ أَوْ اطْرَحُوهُ أَرْضًا يَخْلُ لَكُمْ وَجْهَ أَبِيكُمْ وَتَكُونُوا مِنْ بَعْدِهِ

قَوْمًا صَالِحِينَ ﴿٩﴾

قَالَ قَائِلٌ مِنْهُمْ لَا تَقْتُلُوا يُوسُفَ وَأَلْقُوهُ فِي غَيَابَتِ الْجُبِّ يَلْتَقِطْهُ بَعْضُ السَّيَّارَةِ

إِنْ كُنْتُمْ فَاعِلِينَ ﴿١٠﴾

[Thereupon] they said [to their father]: 'Father, why do you not trust us with Joseph, when we are indeed his well-wishers?' (11)

Send him with us tomorrow, that he may enjoy himself and play. We will certainly take good care of him.' (12)

He answered: 'It certainly grieves me that you should take him with you; and I dread that the wolf may eat him when you are heedless of him.' (13)

They said: 'If the wolf were to eat him when we are so many, then we should surely be lost.' (14)

And when they went away with him, they resolved to cast him into the depth of the well. We revealed [this] to him: 'You will tell them of this their deed at a time when they shall not know you.' (15)

At nightfall they came to their father weeping, (16)

and said: 'Father, we went off racing and left Joseph behind with our belongings, and the wolf devoured him. But you will not believe us even though we are saying the truth.' (17)

قَالُوا يَتَّابَانَا مَا لَكَ لَا تَأْمَنَّا عَلَى يُوسُفَ
وَإِنَّا لَهُ لَنَنْصِحُونَ ﴿١١﴾

أَرْسِلْهُ مَعَنَا غَدًا يَرْتَع وَيَلْعَب وَإِنَّا لَهُ
لَحَفِظُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

قَالَ إِنِّي لَيَحْزُنُنِي أَنْ تَذْهَبُوا بِهِ وَأَخَافُ
أَنْ يَأْكُلَهُ الذِّئْبُ وَأَنْتُمْ عَنْهُ غَافِلُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

قَالُوا لَئِنْ أَكَلَهُ الذِّئْبُ وَنَحْنُ عُصْبَةٌ
إِنَّا إِذَا لَلْخَسِرُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

فَلَمَّا ذَهَبُوا بِهِ وَأَجْمَعُوا أَنْ يَجْعَلُوهُ فِي
غَيْبَتِ الْجُبِّ وَأَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْهِ لَتُنَبِّئَنَّهُمْ
بِأَمْرِهِمْ هَذَا وَهُمْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

وَجَاءُوا أَبَاهُمْ عِشَاءً يَبْكُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

قَالُوا يَتَّابَانَا إِنَّا ذَهَبْنَا نَسْتَبِقُ وَتَرَكْنَا
يُوسُفَ عِنْدَ مَتَاعِنَا فَأَكَلَهُ الذِّئْبُ وَمَا
أَنْتَ بِمُؤْمِنٍ لَنَا وَلَوْ كُنَّا صَادِقِينَ ﴿١٧﴾

And they produced his shirt stained with false blood. He said: 'No, but your minds have tempted you to evil. Sweet patience! It is to God alone that I turn for support in this misfortune that you have described.' (18)

And there came a caravan; and they sent their water-drawer, and he let down his bucket into the well — [and when he saw Joseph] he cried: 'What good luck. Here is a boy!' They concealed him with a view to selling him; but God had full knowledge of what they were doing. (19)

And they sold him for a paltry price, a few silver coins. Thus low did they value him. (20)

وَجَاءُوا عَلَى قَمِيصِهِ بِدَمٍ كَذِبٍ ۚ قَالَ
بَلْ سَوَّلَتْ لَكُمْ أَنْفُسُكُمْ أَمْرًا ۖ فَصَبْرٌ
حَمِيلٌ ۗ وَاللَّهُ الْمُسْتَعَانُ عَلَىٰ مَا تَصِفُونَ



وَجَاءَتْ سَيَّارَةٌ فَأَرْسَلُوا وَارِدَهُمْ فَأَدْلَىٰ
دَلْوَهُ ۗ قَالَ يَبِشْرِي هَذَا غُلْمٌ ۚ وَأَسْرَوْهُ
بِضْعَةٍ ۗ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ بِمَا يَعْمَلُونَ

وَشَرَوْهُ بِثَمَنٍ بَخْسٍ دَرَاهِمَ مَعْدُودَةٍ
وَكَانُوا فِيهِ مِنَ الظَّالِمِينَ

The Opening of an Excellent Narrative

This passage serves as an introduction to the *sūrah* and relates the first episode of the story, comprising six scenes. It begins with Joseph's dream and recounts the details of his brothers' conspiracy against him, until he arrives in Egypt.

Alif. Lām. Rā. These are the verses of the Book that clearly shows [the truth]. We have revealed it as a discourse in Arabic so that you may understand. In revealing this Qur'ān We relate to you the best of narratives. Before it you were among those who are unaware [of revelation]. (Verses 1-3)

This is yet another *sūrah* which begins with three separate letters, 'Alif Lām. Rā.' These and similar letters of the alphabet, which are well known to people and always used by them, are the same that spell out the revealed verses the composition of which is well beyond human ability. They make up the book that shows the truth

clearly, i.e. the Qur'ān. God has revealed it in the Arabic tongue which uses these well-known letters, *'so that you may understand.'* (Verse 2) You will realize that the One who makes out of ordinary words a book of surpassing excellence like the Qur'ān. Hence, it stands to reason that the Qur'ān must be revelation. Human intellect is thus called upon to reflect on this fact and its inevitable implications.

Since a very large part of this *sūrah* is a story, the narrative aspect of this book has been singled out for special mention: *'In revealing this Qur'ān We relate to you the best of narratives.'* (Verse 3) This narrative is part of the Qur'ān We have revealed to you, and it is an excellent story. What were you prior to receiving divine revelations? *'Before it you were among those who are unaware [of revelation].'* (Verse 3) You were an unlettered person like the majority of your people who do not even reflect on such subjects as the Qur'ān discusses.

This is merely an introduction to the story. The curtains are then lifted to reveal the first scene of the first episode. We see Joseph, a young boy, relating his dream to his father: *"Joseph said to his father: 'Father, I saw in a dream eleven stars, as well as the sun and the moon; I saw them prostrate themselves before me.' 'My son,' he replied, do not relate your dream to your brothers, lest they plot some evil against you. Satan is indeed man's open enemy. Even thus will your Lord make you His chosen one, and will impart to you some understanding of the real meaning of statements. He will perfect His favour to you and to the House of Jacob, as He perfected it to your forefathers, Abraham and Isaac. Your Lord is certainly All-Knowing, Wise."* (Verses 4-6)

Joseph was a young boy, but the vision he related to his father was not of the type which boys and young people normally see in their dreams. The most that a boy like him would experience in a dream would be to see those stars and the sun and moon on his lap or close by, with him reaching out his hands to touch them. But Joseph saw them prostrating themselves to him, which means that they took the shape of intelligent creatures who bowed in respect to someone of superior status. The *sūrah* recounts very clearly what he said to his father: *"Joseph said to his father: Father, I saw in a dream eleven stars, as well as the sun and the moon."* (Verse 4) Then the verb 'saw' is repeated again for greater effect: *"I saw them prostrate themselves before me."* (Verse 4)

Endowed with wisdom and great insight, his father, Jacob, realizes that the dream is a pointer to something great that would happen to his young son. Neither he nor the *sūrah* spells it out at this stage. In fact its early indications begin to appear in the third episode, but it is not revealed completely until the end of the story when everything is made clear. He advises him not to relate his vision to his brothers, lest they should get an inkling of what it indicates for their young half brother. For that could open the way to Satan who would try to arouse their jealousy and instigate some evil scheming against him: *"'My son,' he replied, 'do not relate your dream to your brothers, lest they plot some evil against you.'"* (Verse 5) He then provides the grounds

for his fear: *'Satan is indeed man's open enemy.'* (Verse 5) He plays off one person against another, trying to make evil appear pleasant.

Jacob, Isaac's son and Abraham's grandson, feels that his young son will have some distinguished role to play, and he hopes that this will be in the realm of religion and divine guidance. He is right to do so as he himself is a prophet and he knows that his grandfather, Abraham, received God's blessings which were also bestowed on the believers in his household. He thus expects that Joseph may be the one whom God will choose from among his children to receive His blessings and continue the blessed chain among Abraham's descendants: *"Even thus will your Lord make you His chosen one, and will impart to you some understanding of the real meaning of statements. He will perfect His favour to you and to the House of Jacob, as He perfected it to your forefathers, Abraham and Isaac. Your Lord is certainly All-Knowing, Wise."* (Verse 6)

It is only natural that Jacob should feel that Joseph's dream indicates that he may be God's choice to receive His perfect blessings, just as these were bestowed on his forefathers, Abraham and Isaac. What captures our attention here is his statement: *"And [He] will impart to you some understanding of the real meaning of statements."* (Verse 6) The Arabic word, *ta'wīl*, rendered here as 'understanding' means literally 'knowledge of the outcome.' So, to what does the word 'statements' refer? Does Jacob mean that God will choose Joseph, teach and provide him with penetrating insight so that he knows the outcome of a statement or an event by knowing its beginning? For that is an inspiration God grants to those who have true knowledge. The comment at the end of this verse is most appropriate: *"Your Lord is certainly All-Knowing, Wise."* (Verse 6) Or does Jacob merely refer here to dreams and visions, as actually happened to Joseph? Both are possible and both fit in well with the general atmosphere in the lives of Joseph and his father Jacob.

Interpretation of Dreams

Here we need to refer to dreams and visions which are part of the subject matter of this *sūrah*.

We must inevitably believe that some dreams prophesy something that will happen in the near or distant future. Two reasons may be identified here: the first is that Joseph's, his two fellow prisoners' and the King of Egypt's dreams all came true. Secondly, in our own lives we find that some dreams come true and this is frequent enough to make it impossible to deny the relationship.

So what is the nature of dreams then? The school of analytical psychology considers them as the subconscious expression of suppressed desires. This accounts for some dreams, but not all of them. Freud himself, despite his grossly unscientific and arbitrary approach, acknowledges that there are prophetic dreams. So what is

the nature of this type of dream?

First of all we have to say that whether we know their nature or not does not affect the fact that there are such dreams and that some of them are true. We are here only trying to understand certain aspects of man's nature, and some of the laws God has set in operation in the universe.

Our concept of these dreams is as follows: time and place constitute barriers which prevent man from seeing what we call the past, the future or the whole of the present. The past and future are screened by a time factor, while the present that is not in our immediate vicinity is screened by a place factor. A sense which we do not know about in man's make-up may at times become alert or may at times have extra strength and go beyond the time factor to see vaguely what lies beyond it. This is not true knowledge, but rather a form of discerning, similar to what happens to some people while awake and to others while asleep, when they are able to go beyond the barriers of either time or place, or indeed both. We do not in fact know anything about the true nature of time, nor is the nature of place or matter known to us fully: *"You have been given but scanty knowledge."* (17: 85) Anyway, Joseph has seen his dream, and we will consider its interpretation later.

The First Thread in a Sinister Plot

Next, we find ourselves looking at Joseph's brothers discussing some sort of plot. This begins with a clear indication that what follows is particularly important.

"Surely in Joseph and his brothers there are signs for those who inquire." (Verse 7) Anyone who looks for signs, indications and clues will find plenty in the story of Joseph and his brothers. This opening is sufficient to alert our attention and interest. Hence, it is similar to the raising of the curtains to allow events to take place.

Did Joseph tell his dream to his brothers as mentioned in the Old Testament? The sequence of the narrative here implies that he did not. They speak of their father's favouritism of Joseph and his full brother. Had they known of his dream, they would have mentioned it, because it would have been an added reason for their grudge against him. What Jacob feared would happen, should Joseph relate his dream to his brothers, did eventually happen but for different reasons, namely because of Joseph being his favourite. It had to happen anyway, because it was simply an episode in the great line of events which led Joseph to his appointed destination. All his life circumstances, his family position, and the fact that he was born to an elderly father led to his position of special favour. The youngest children, as Joseph and his brother were, are normally the dearest, particularly when the father is elderly.

"They said [to one another]: 'Truly, Joseph and his brother are dearer to our father than

we, even though we are many.” (Verse 8) As a group we are able to protect our family and ensure its position. *“Surely our father is in manifest error.”* (Verse 8) He bestows his greatest love and favours on two young children, ignoring what we accomplish.

Their rage at this situation soon reaches its flash point, and they are no longer able to evaluate matters properly. Unimportant factors are seen by them to be of great significance, while important ones are given little attention. Sons of a prophet as they are – although they themselves are not prophets – they think lightly of murder, even when the victim is their own little, defenceless brother. That their father appears to love him more than he loves them is blown out of all proportion so that it seems equal to murder, the greatest crime on earth after that of associating partners with God. *“Kill Joseph, or cast him away in some faraway land.”* (Verse 9) The two alternatives are not dissimilar in their effect. To cast a little child off in a faraway land where he has no one to look after him will most probably lead to his death. And why do they want to do this? *“So that you have your father’s attention turned to you alone.”* (Verse 9) Joseph would no longer be his preoccupation. It is as if they feel that when their father no longer sees Joseph his mind and heart will be free and his love and attention will be turned to them. But what about the crime itself? It is only an offence and repentance is sure to erase it. They would then be able to wipe away its consequences. *“After that you will [repent and] be righteous people.”* (Verse 9)

Thus Satan weaves his schemes, making people accept what is unacceptable, when they have lost control and no longer see matters in the proper perspective. When their jealousy reaches boiling point, Satan puts forward his suggestion: *“Kill.”* He wraps his wicked suggestion around an appealing prospect, that repentance will mend the offence. But repentance is not like that. Repentance is remorse and regret for an error which someone commits blindly, when he does not remember God and the consequences of his offence. Repentance is never of the ready rehearsed type prepared before the crime to reduce the sense of guilt. This does not constitute repentance. It is part of the justification of the crime, to make it appear less heinous.

One of the brothers, however, felt a shudder at the atrocity they were contemplating. He put forward a suggestion which would rid them of Joseph without killing him or abandoning him in the middle of nowhere. Thus they would have all their father’s attention. He proposed that they should cast him into a well on the caravan route. It was very likely that a caravan would find him and take him to a faraway land. *“One of them said: Do not kill Joseph, but rather – if you must do something – cast him into the dark depths of this well. Some caravan may pick him up.”* (Verse 10) The phrase, *‘if you must do something,’* gives the impression of doubt, as if he is raising doubt in their minds about harming Joseph. This expression of reservation aims to weaken the resolve of the other party. But Joseph’s brothers bore a deep grudge and they had to do something about their situation. They had no intention of going back

on what they had decided. This is clearly apparent in the next scene.

Deceiving an Elderly Father

Now we see them with their father trying to persuade him to let them take Joseph with them the following day. They are intent on deceiving their father and carrying out their wicked scheme against Joseph. “[Thereupon] they said [to their father]: ‘Father, why do you not trust us with Joseph, when we are indeed his well-wishers. Send him with us tomorrow, that he may enjoy himself and play. We will certainly take good care of him.’ He answered: ‘It certainly grieves me that you should take him with you; and I dread that the wolf may eat him when you are heedless of him.’ They said: ‘If the wolf were to eat him when we are so many, then we should surely be lost.’” (Verses 11-14) Here we see through fine words and expressions how much effort they exerted in trying to win over their father’s heart.

As they begin, they address him by virtue of their relationship, “Father!” Then they follow this with a question that suggests tacit remonstrance: “Why do you not trust us with Joseph?” (Verse 11) This invites Jacob’s denial, so that he admits what is opposite and allows Joseph to go with them. Jacob had thus far prevented Joseph from going with his brothers to the pasture land and open areas they frequented because he loved him so dearly and feared that at his young age he might not withstand the tiring journey and the hard weather. It was not because he suspected any foul play. Hence, by suggesting that their father did not trust them, the brothers sought his denial of the same. In this way, his resolve to keep Joseph at home was weakened. It was a foul trick with a foul aim in mind.

“Father, why do you not trust us with Joseph, when we are indeed his well-wishers?” (Verse 11) They are emphasizing here that their hearts are full of good intentions towards their brother. However, a schemer often betrays himself. The stress they placed on wishing their brother well almost betrayed the ill feelings they harboured against him. “Send him with us tomorrow, that he may enjoy himself and play. We will certainly take good care of him.” (Verse 12) Once again they emphasized their awareness of their responsibility to guard and protect Joseph. They also painted a pleasant picture of what awaited Joseph of play and pleasure to persuade their father to send him with them.

In reply to their remonstrations, Jacob indirectly denied that he did not trust them with their brother. He justified keeping Joseph with him by saying that he would miss him even if he were absent for a day or so, and he would worry about Joseph being attacked by wolves: “He answered: ‘It certainly grieves me that you should take him with you; and I dread that the wolf may eat him when you are heedless of him.’” (Verse 13) In effect, he said he always wanted Joseph beside him. This must have intensified the

brothers' grudge even further. How could it be that their father missed him even when he went out to play for a few hours! -

"I dread that the wolf may eat him when you are heedless of him." (Verse 13) They must have found in his words the excuse they were looking for, for they immediately reassure Jacob that they will take good care of Joseph. *"They said: 'If the wolf were to eat him when we are so many, then we should surely be lost.'"* (Verse 14) If a wolf should beat us when we are so many and so strong, then we are good for nothing. We lose everything.

Thus the protective father gives way to the strong persuasion and impassioned assurances of his sons. It was against his better judgement that he should let them take Joseph, but he was clearly embarrassed. Thus, God's will came to pass and the events of the story unfolded.

Fast-Changing Fortunes

Then we see them on their way, Joseph with them, and they intent on putting their wicked plot into effect. God Almighty inspires the young boy, reassuring him that it is only a trial that is certain to come to an end. He will survive and he will remind his brothers of their plot against him on a day when they will not know him to be Joseph. *"And when they went away with him, they resolved to cast him into the depths of the well. We revealed [this] to him: 'You will tell them of this their deed at a time when they shall not know you.'"* (Verse 15)

Their resolve, then, was to cast him into the dark depths of a well to remove him altogether from their family life. At this point when Joseph fears for his life, when there's no one to help him and ten adult and powerful brothers against him, a mere young child, reassurance comes to him through inspiration that he will be saved and will live until such a time as he reminds them of their crime. At that point in the future, they will not know that he is their brother whom they had thrown into the well.

We leave Joseph now to face his ordeal, undoubtedly reassured by God's inspiration, to look at his brothers facing their saddened father after committing their crime: *"At nightfall they came to their father weeping, and said: 'Father, we went off racing and left Joseph behind with our belongings, and the wolf devoured him. But you will not believe us even though we are saying the truth.' And they produced his shirt stained with false blood. He said: No, but your minds have tempted you to evil. Sweet patience! It is to God alone that I turn for support in this misfortune that you have described."* (Verses 16-18)

Their blindness meant their plot was imperfect. Had they taken a calmer approach, they would not have harmed Joseph the first time their father permitted

them to take him with them. But they were impatient, fearing that they might not have another chance. We also see an aspect of their impatience in their choice of excuse, accusing the wolf. Their father warned them against this possibility only the night before, and they made the whole episode sound outrageous. It was just not plausible that they abandoned Joseph to the risk their father specifically warned them against. The same impatience is seen in the way they stained Joseph's shirt with blood, without bothering to make it look real. The action was hasty, betraying their lies, so much so that the blood itself is described as lies, or false.

They did all this and then *"At nightfall they came to their father weeping, and said: 'Father, we went off racing and left Joseph behind with our belongings, and the wolf devoured him.'" (Verses 16-17)* As they said this, they seemed to realize it was all too thin. A liar often betrays himself. Hence they followed their false statement with this remark: *"But you will not believe us even though we are saying the truth."* (Verse 17) You have your doubts and you do not trust us, so you will not believe us even when we say the truth.

With such strong indications, and with something in his heart telling him otherwise, Jacob felt that Joseph had not been eaten by a wolf, and that his brothers had ditched him somewhere. He realized that their story was concocted and what they described was plainly false. He faced them with this, saying that their minds had made something ghastly appear acceptable to them and urged them to commit it. He declared that he would be patient under this adversity. He would neither panic nor complain. He would seek only God's support against their fabricated lies: *"He said: No, but your minds have tempted you to evil. Sweet patience! It is to God alone that I turn for support in this misfortune that you have described."* (Verse 18)

Now we quickly return to Joseph in the well to see the last scene of this first episode: *"And there came a caravan; and they sent their water-drawer, and he let down his bucket into the well – [and when he saw Joseph] he cried: 'What good luck. Here is a boy!' They concealed him with a view to selling him; but God had full knowledge of what they were doing. And they sold him for a paltry price, a few silver coins. Thus low did they value him."* (Verses 19-20)

The well was by the side of the caravan route, and caravans always take water wherever they can find it, whether in wells or in pits where rain water gathers.

"There came a caravan." The term used here to refer to the caravan is *sayyārah*, which derives from long travel. *"They sent their water-drawer,"* i.e. the person assigned the task of finding water for the caravan because he is experienced in such a vital matter. He does the normal thing, letting down his bucket into the well, to make sure that it is not dry, or to fill the bucket. The *sūrah* does not mention any details of Joseph's reaction when he saw the bucket being lowered and his quick movement to attach himself to it, so as to keep it a surprise to reader and listener alike.

When the water-drawer sees Joseph, he lets out a cry: *“What good luck. Here is a boy!”* Once again, all that follows is deleted: what was said, what action was taken, and how pleased Joseph was when he was pulled out of the well. Instead, the *sūrah* speaks immediately of his situation with the caravan: *“They concealed him with a view to selling him.”* (Verse 19) This means that they considered him secret merchandise and thereby something they could sell.

They realized that he was not a slave, which accounts for why they hid him. Then, they sold him on the cheap: *“And they sold him for a paltry price, a few silver coins.”* (Verse 20) That was their currency at the time. People only counted coins however when the price was low, and weighed them when the price was high. Here the *sūrah* speaks of counting the coins to indicate how cheaply they sold him.

“Thus low did they value him.” (Verse 20) They wanted rid of him quickly so that they did not have to account for enslaving and selling a free child.

Thus the first trial in the life of this noble prophet is over.

2

Facing Up to Trial

The man from Egypt who bought him said to his wife: Be kind to him. He may well be of use to us, or we may adopt him as our son.' Thus We established Joseph in the land, and We imparted to him some understanding of the real meaning of statements. God always prevails in whatever be His purpose; though most people may not know it. (21)

And when he attained his full manhood, We bestowed on him wisdom and knowledge. Thus do We reward those who do good. (22)

She in whose house he was living tried to seduce him. She bolted the doors and said, 'Come.' He said: 'God protect me. Goodly has my master made my stay here. Those who do wrong come to no good.' (23)

وَقَالَ الَّذِي اشْتَرَاهُ مِنْ مِصْرَ لِمَرْأَتِهِ
أَكْرِمِي مَثْوَاهُ عَسَىٰ أَنْ يَنْفَعَنَا أَوْ
نَتَّخِذَهُ وَوَلَدًا ۚ وَكَذَٰلِكَ مَكَّنَّا لِيُوسُفَ
فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلِنُعَلِّمَهُ ۚ مِنْ تَأْوِيلِ
الْأَحَادِيثِ ۚ وَاللَّهُ غَالِبٌ عَلَىٰ أَمْرِهِ
وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

وَلَمَّا بَلَغَ أَشُدَّهُ ۖ آتَيْنَاهُ حُكْمًا وَعِلْمًا
وَكَذَٰلِكَ نَجْزِي الْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿٢٢﴾

وَرَاوَدَتْهُ الَّتِي هُوَ فِي بَيْتِهَا عَنْ نَفْسِهِ
وَعَلَّقَتِ الْأَبْوَابَ وَقَالَتْ هَيْتَ لَكَ
قَالَ مَعَاذَ اللَّهِ ۖ إِنَّهُ رَبِّي أَحْسَنَ مَثْوَايَ
إِنَّهُ لَا يَفْلِحُ الظَّالِمُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

She truly desired him, and he desired her. [He would have succumbed] had he not seen a clear sign from his Lord. Thus We averted from him evil and indecency. He was truly one of Our faithful servants. (24)

And they both rushed to the door. She tore his shirt from behind. And at the door they met her husband. She said: 'What ought to be the punishment of someone who had evil designs on your wife other than that he should be thrown in prison or some grievous punishment.' (25)

[Joseph] said: 'It was she who sought to seduce me.' One of her own household testified: 'If his shirt has been torn from the front, then she is speaking the truth and he is lying. (26)

But if it has been torn from behind, then she is lying, and he is speaking the truth.' (27)

When [her husband] saw that Joseph's shirt was torn from behind, he said to her: 'This is indeed [an instance] of the guile of you, women. Your guile is awesome indeed!' (28)

Joseph, let this pass! And you, woman, ask forgiveness for your sin. You have been seriously at fault.' (29)

وَلَقَدْ هَمَّتْ بِهِ ^ط وَهَمَّ بِهَا لَوْلَا أَنْ رَأَى
بُرْهَانَ رَبِّهِ ^ع كَذَلِكَ لِنَصْرِفَ عَنْهُ
السُّوَاءَ وَالْفَحْشَاءَ ^ع إِنَّهُ مِنْ عِبَادِنَا
الْمُخْلِصِينَ ﴿٢٤﴾

وَأَسْتَبَقَا الْبَابَ وَقَدَّتْ قَمِيصَهُ مِنْ دُبُرٍ
وَأَلْفِيَا سَيِّدَهَا لَدَا الْبَابِ قَالَتْ مَا جَزَاءُ
مَنْ أَرَادَ بِأَهْلِكَ سُوءًا إِلَّا أَنْ يُسْجَنَ أَوْ
عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٥﴾

قَالَ هِيَ رَوَدَّتْنِي عَنْ نَفْسِي ^ع وَشَهِدَ
شَاهِدٌ مِّنْ أَهْلِهَا إِنْ كَانَ قَمِيصُهُ قُدَّ
مِنْ قَبْلِ فَصَدَقْتَ وَهُوَ مِنَ الْكَاذِبِينَ ﴿٢٦﴾
وَإِنْ كَانَ قَمِيصُهُ قُدَّ مِنْ دُبُرٍ فَكَذَبْتَ
وَهُوَ مِنَ الصَّادِقِينَ ﴿٢٧﴾

فَلَمَّا رَأَى قَمِيصَهُ قُدَّ مِنْ دُبُرٍ قَالَ إِنَّهُ
مِنْ كَيْدِكُنَّ ^ط إِنَّ كَيْدَكُنَّ عَظِيمٌ ﴿٢٨﴾
يُوسُفُ أَعْرِضْ عَنْ هَذَا ^ع وَاسْتَغْفِرِي
لِذَنْبِكِ ^ط إِنَّكَ كُنْتَ مِنَ الْخَاطِئِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

In the city, women were saying: 'The Chief Minister's wife is trying to seduce her slave lad, as she is passionately in love with him. We see that she is clearly going astray.' (30)

When she heard of their malicious talk, she sent for them, and prepared for them a sumptuous repast, and handed each one of them a knife and said [to Joseph]: 'Come out and present yourself to them.' When they saw him, they were amazed at him, and they cut their hands, exclaiming: 'God preserve us! This is no mortal man! This is none other than a noble angel.' (31)

Said she: 'This is he on whose account you have been me! Indeed I have tried to seduce him, but he guarded his chastity. Now, however, if he does not do what I bid him, he shall certainly be thrown in prison, and shall indeed be humiliated.' (32)

[Joseph] said: 'My Lord, I would sooner be put in prison than comply with what they are inviting me to do. Unless You turn away their guile from me, I may yield to them and lapse into folly.' (33)

His Lord answered his prayer and warded off their guile from him. It is He alone who hears all and knows all. (34)

﴿ وَقَالَ نِسْوَةٌ فِي الْمَدِينَةِ امْرَأَتُ الْعَزِيزِ تُرَاوِدُ فَتْنَهَا عَن نَّفْسِهِ ۗ قَدْ شَغَفَهَا حُبًّا ۗ إِنَّا لَنَرُلَهَا فِي ضَلَالٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٣٠﴾

فَلَمَّا سَمِعَتْ بِمَكْرِهِنَّ أَرْسَلَتْ إِلَيْهِنَّ وَأَعْتَدَتْ لَهُنَّ مُتَّكًا ۖ وَآتَتْ كُلَّ وَاحِدَةٍ مِّنْهُنَّ سِكِّينًا ۖ وَقَالَتِ آخِرُجْ عَلَيْنَّ فَكَمَا رَأَيْنَهُ أَكْبَرْتُهُ ۚ وَقَطَّعْنَ أَيْدِيَهُنَّ وَقُلْنَ حَاشَ لِلَّهِ مَا هَذَا بَشَرًا ۖ إِنْ هَذَا إِلَّا مَلَكٌ كَرِيمٌ ﴿٣١﴾

قَالَتْ فَذَلِكُنَّ الَّذِي لُمْتُنَّنِي فِيهِ ۖ وَلَقَدْ رَاوَدْتُهُ عَنِ نَفْسِهِ ۗ فَاَسْتَعْصَمَ ۖ وَلَئِن لَّمْ يَفْعَلْ مَا ءَامُرُهُ لَيَكُونَنَّ وَلِيكُونًا مِّنَ الصَّغِيرِينَ ﴿٣٢﴾

قَالَ رَبِّ االسِّجْنُ اَحَبُّ اِلَيَّ مِمَّا يَدْعُونَنِي اِلَيْهِ ۗ وَاِلَّا تَصْرِفْ عَنِّي كَيْدَهُنَّ اَصْبُ اِلَيْهِنَّ وَاَكُن مِّنَ الْجَاهِلِينَ ﴿٣٣﴾

فَاَسْتَجَابَ لَهُ رَبُّهُ فَصَرَفَ عَنْهُ كَيْدَهُنَّ ۗ اِنَّهُ هُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ ﴿٣٤﴾

Overview

This passage relates the second episode of Joseph's story, after he had reached

Egypt where he was sold as a slave. However, the man who bought him felt that the boy was a good person. Such feelings may be sensed from a person's looks, particularly if they are coupled with good manners. Hence the man recommends his wife to take good care of the boy. Here begins the first thread in how his dream comes true.

But another trial of a totally different type was awaiting Joseph when he reached his prime. Prior to this, he would have been given wisdom and knowledge which would help him confront the forthcoming trial, one which only those on whom God bestows His grace can stand up to and resist. It was a trial of seduction in palaces where the aristocratic environment is often characterized by loose morality. Joseph emerged unscathed from it in his moral and religious values.

Settling in Egypt

The man from Egypt who bought him said to his wife: Be kind to him. He may well be of use to us, or we may adopt him as our son. Thus We established Joseph in the land, and We imparted to him some understanding of the real meaning of statements. God always prevails in whatever be His purpose; though most people may not know it. (Verse 21)

The *sūrah* does not as yet reveal the identity of the person who bought him. After a long time we learn that he is a person in a very high position, perhaps Egypt's chief minister. But for now we only know that Joseph has reached a safe place, and that his first trial is over, and that bright prospects await him.

"Be kind to him." (Verse 21) This is how most translators of the Qur'ān render the first statement said by the man who bought Joseph. Literally the man says: "Be generous in his place of abode." Although this is meant to be an instruction to treat him kindly, the expression signifies greater kindness to be contrasted with his stay in the well and all the fears that were associated with that experience.

But the man goes further and tells his wife of what he hopes for the boy's future: "He may well be of use to us, or we may adopt him as our son." (Verse 21) Perhaps they did not have any children, as some reports suggest. Hence, the man started thinking that should the boy prove himself to be up to his master's expectations, with regard to intelligence, character and good looks, he might adopt him as his own.

At this point in the narrative, the *sūrah* pauses a little to state that all this was God's arrangement. It was through His design that Joseph was established in the land. This began with him occupying a firm position in the man's heart and in his home. The *sūrah* then says that Joseph would continue along the same road, and that

God would give him the faculty to interpret statements properly and accurately. It comments on the early steps in consolidating Joseph's position by saying that God's will shall always be done. Nothing can impede or stop it. He is in full control of everything in the universe. *"Thus We established Joseph in the land, and We imparted to him some understanding of the real meaning of statements. God always prevails in whatever be His purpose."* (Verse 21)

Here we see Joseph caught between what his brothers wanted to do to him and what God wanted for him. Since God prevails in whatever His purpose may be, His will was done. Joseph's brothers could not achieve their purpose: *"God always prevails in whatever be His purpose, though most people may not know it."* (Verse 21) Most people do not know that God's law always operates, and that His will is always done.

The *sūrah* goes on to state that what God willed for Joseph came to pass. This is a reference to what the *sūrah* stated: *"We imparted to him some understanding of the real meaning of statements."* (Verse 21) Furthermore, when Joseph attained adulthood, more was given to him: *"And when he attained his full manhood, We bestowed on him wisdom and knowledge. Thus do We reward those who do good."* (Verse 22) He was given a good sense to judge matters well, and also knowledge of the meaning of statements or the interpretation of dreams, or what is more general, such as knowledge of life and its different circumstances. The statement here is very general, admitting broad interpretation. That was Joseph's reward for having done well in both belief and behaviour: *"Thus do We reward those who do good."* (Verse 22)

A Trial of Temptation

At this point Joseph experiences the second trial in his life. It is much more severe and profound than the first one. It comes when he has been given wisdom and knowledge as a gesture of God's grace. Hence, he faces it squarely, and he is saved from it as a reward for doing good. This trial takes the form of temptation, and the *sūrah* paints a very charged picture of the whole encounter, when Joseph was vulnerable to great risks.

She in whose house he was living tried to seduce him. She bolted the doors and said, 'Come.' He said: 'God protect me. Goodly has my master made my stay here. Those who do wrong come to no good.' She truly desired him, and he desired her. [He would have succumbed] had he not seen a clear sign from his Lord. Thus We averted from him evil and indecency. He was truly one of Our faithful servants. And they both rushed to the door. She tore his shirt from behind. And at the door they met her husband. She said: 'What ought to be the punishment of someone who had evil designs on your wife other than that he should be thrown in prison or some grievous punishment.' [Joseph] said: It was she who sought to seduce me.' One of her own

household testified: 'If his shirt has been torn from the front, then she is speaking the truth and he is lying. But if it has been torn from behind, then she is lying, and he is speaking the truth.' When [her husband] saw that Joseph's shirt was torn from behind, he said to her: *'This is indeed [an instance] of the guile of you, women. Your guile is awesome indeed!' Joseph, let this pass! And you, woman, ask forgiveness for your sin. You have been seriously at fault.'* (Verses 23-29)

The *sūrah* does not mention the ages of Joseph and the woman at the time. So let us consider the matter and estimate their respective ages.

Joseph was in early adolescence at the time the caravan picked him up and sold him in Egypt. He must have been around 14, or maybe less, but certainly no more than that. He was at an age when the Arabic term, *ghulām*, may be applied to him. After that he would be described as a youth, then as a man. At that time, the woman was already married, and apparently neither she nor her husband had had any children. This is implied by her husband's words, *"We may adopt him as a son"*. (Verse 21) The thought of adoption does not normally occur unless the one who entertains it is childless, and has practically given up hope of having a child. This means that she must have been married for quite a long time, which was sufficient for them to realize that they would not have a child. Moreover, the man who was Egypt's chief minister must have been at least 40 years of age, and she, his wife, around 30.

Furthermore, we expect that at the time of this event, she must have been at least 40, and Joseph probably 25 or near to that. We imagine that this was her age because her behaviour during the event and subsequently shows that she was a woman of intelligence, self-possessed but bold, scheming and infatuated at the same time. Further evidence to support this is found in the words of those women who talked about her, saying: *"The Chief Minister's wife is trying to seduce her slave lad."* (Verse 30) Although the Arabic word, *fatā*, rendered here as 'slave lad' stresses the sense of his slavery, it would not have been said unless Joseph's age supported it. This is more likely, weighing up all the evidence in the text.

We have discussed all this in order to arrive at the conclusion that Joseph's trial was not merely about resisting temptation. His real trial was that he spent all his adolescent years in this palace, with this woman who was between 30 and 40 years of age, with all that goes on in palaces and in an environment which may be best described by the husband's attitude when he saw his wife with Joseph. All that he had to say was: *"Joseph, let this pass! And you, woman, ask forgiveness for your sin. You have been seriously at fault."* (Verse 29)

It is a social environment in which women speak ill of the chief minister's wife, and her reply is to invite them to a sumptuous banquet during which she orders Joseph to walk in front of them. They, in turn, are all infatuated with him, and make

their feelings public. She then admits to what she had done: *“Indeed I have tried to seduce him, but he guarded his chastity. Now, however, if he does not do what I bid him, he shall certainly be thrown in prison, and shall indeed be humiliated.”* (Verse 32)

A social environment which allows these attitudes is a special one. It is that of affluent aristocracy. Joseph was a slave lad who spent his adolescent years in such an environment. That is indeed the long trial which he endured. He resisted its influences, temptations, frivolity and wicked designs. His age and that of the woman under whose roof he had lived for such a long period are significant in estimating the pressure he was under, the gravity of his trial and his long resistance. As for this particular incident, it would not have been particularly difficult for Joseph to resist, had it come suddenly, without long preparation. It would have been made easier by the fact that he was the target of temptation, not the seeker. For a man may find a woman who throws herself at him not very appealing.

Let us now examine the text as it describes the situation: *“She in whose house he was living tried to seduce him. She bolted the doors and said, ‘Come.’”* (Verse 23) This time it was a bold attempt at seduction, with an open invitation to go the full course. The bolting of the doors only comes at the last moment. The woman was already at the point when desire is at its strongest. Hence, she calls out to him, ‘Come’. This bold, crude invitation is never the first one made by a woman. Indeed, it is of the ultimate type which may never be used unless the woman is forced to resort to it. The young man was living in her house and his growth, strength and development were all there for her to see, just as her own femininity was at its optimum. There must, therefore, have been earlier attempts at gentle persuasion before she resorted to this crude and sudden invitation.

“He said: ‘God protect me. Goodly has my master made my stay here. Those who do wrong come to no good.’” (Verse 23) First he appeals to God to protect him against doing such a grave and sinful act: *“God protect me”* (Verse 23) He then refers to God’s grace when He saved him from the well and placed him in a home where he was secure and treated kindly: *“Goodly has my master made my stay here.”* (Verse 23) He then expounds a clear principle: *“Those who do wrong come to no good.”* (Verse 23) The ‘wrong’ intended here is the one which she wants him to do, but it represents a trespass over what God has forbidden.

The *sūrah* makes it absolutely clear that Joseph’s reply to the open attempt at seduction was a straightforward refusal, coupled with remembrance of the grace God had bestowed on him, as well as remembrance of the limits which no one should violate. There was no initial compliance when she invited him openly after bolting the doors and speaking in crude terms of what she wanted him to do. This last point is given in the *sūrah* in a much milder form which hints at what actually took place. This is what we understand from the unusual Arabic expression which

we have rendered here as, 'Come'.

False Accusation and Irrefutable Testimony

"She truly desired him, and he desired her. [He would have succumbed] had he not seen a clear sign from his Lord." (Verse 24) All commentators on the Qur'ān, past and present alike, have focused their attention on this last incident. Those who have taken their information from Jewish sources mention numerous legendary reports describing Joseph as one driven by insatiable desire, and God unable to restrain him despite all His evidence. He is said to have seen his father's image on the ceiling, biting his finger. Another such report suggests that he saw several plates of calligraphy, with verses of the Qur'ān, [Yes, the Qur'ān!] denouncing such action, but he continues as though he saw nothing. Then God sent the angel Gabriel, telling him to save Joseph. The angel hit him in the chest. There are many such reports, but they are all clearly groundless and manifestly fabricated.

Most commentators on the Qur'ān say that her desire was physical, whilst his was mental. Then he saw the evidence from his Lord, and he was able to resist temptation.

The late scholar, Rashīd Riḍā', rejects this view altogether. He says that she desired to hit him because of his dignified resistance when she was the mistress to be obeyed. On the other hand, he desired to repel her, but he preferred to try to escape. However, she caught up with him and tore his shirt from behind. To interpret the verse as her desire to hit him and his desire to repel the aggression however is merely an attempt to draw Joseph away from responding to temptation at that particular moment. This is an arbitrary interpretation which lacks proper support.

Looking at the text here, and reviewing Joseph's situation, given that he had lived for quite some time in the palace, I feel that the Qur'ānic statement, *"She truly desired him, and he desired her. [He would have succumbed] had he not seen a clear sign from his Lord,"* represents the culmination of a long line of temptation on the one hand, and initial resistance on the other. This is a true description of a goodly human soul, resisting temptation, then weakening a little, then turning to God for support and escaping unscathed. The *sūrah* does not dwell for long on these conflicting emotions, because the Qur'ān does not aim to paint that moment into a panoramic scene that is far larger than what is appropriate to the story, or to human life in general. Hence, the *sūrah* mentions Joseph's resistance at the outset and at the end, with a moment of weakness in between. This then gives us a credible and practical picture.

This interpretation of the text is closer to human nature and to the protection God grants prophets. Joseph was only a human being. It is true that he was chosen by God. That is indeed the reason why his weakness was limited to feelings only, and

lasted just for a brief moment. When he saw a sign from his Lord shining in his heart and conscience, he resumed his resistance to all temptation.

“Thus We averted from him evil and indecency. He was truly one of Our faithful servants.” (Verse 24) When he came to himself, he wanted to rush away while she went after him, excited, out of control: *“And they both rushed to the door.”* (Verse 25) As she tried to pull him away from the door, *“she tore his shirt from behind.”* (Verse 25) At this moment, a totally unexpected surprise awaited them: *“And at the door they met her husband.”* (Verse 25) The mature woman who is in control of the situation emerges here. An answer to the question raised by the husband to the very suspicious scene is readily given. An unhesitating accusation of Joseph being the offender is immediately stated. However, she still loves him and does not want him to collect a very severe punishment, so she suggests a safe one: *“She said: ‘What ought to be the punishment of someone who has evil designs on your wife other than that he should be thrown in prison or some grievous punishment?’”* (Verse 25) But Joseph would not accept this false accusation, so he speaks out in reply: *“It was she who sought to seduce me.”* (Verse 26)

The *sūrah* states here that someone from her household came forward as a witness to put an end to the dispute. *“One of her own household testified: If his shirt has been torn from the front, then she is speaking the truth and he is lying. But if it has been torn from behind, then she is lying, and he is speaking the truth.”* (Verses 26-27) Where and when did this witness give his testimony? Did he arrive with the husband and witness the event? Or was he called in by her husband for consultation as people sometimes call in a respectable person of the wife’s family? This may fit well with the practices of the aristocracy which is often devoid of moral values.

Both alternatives are possible. Neither affects the outcome. His view is described as a testimony because it provides a way for establishing the truth, considering that the woman’s word is set against Joseph’s. Joseph’s shirt was to be examined: if it was torn from the front, then she must have torn it as she ‘tried to repel his assault’. On the other hand, if his shirt was torn from behind, then he was trying to move away from her as she chased him towards the door. In this case, she would be the one who was lying while he stated the truth. The first possibility is stated first because it would mean that she was right. After all, she was the mistress and he was the slave. It was only proper that this possibility be given prominence.

“When [her husband] saw that Joseph’s shirt was torn from behind,” he realized, both logically and practically, that it was the woman who tried to seduce the man, and then made her accusations against him. Here we see a picture of the high class in ignorant, or *jāhiliyyah* society. Although this picture was drawn several thousand years ago, it is still applicable today. There is clear complacency when faced with sex scandals, followed by attempts to suppress them. Such suppression is the overriding

concern. Hence, the woman's husband merely says to her: *"This is indeed [an instance] of the guile of you, women. Your guile is awesome indeed!"* 'Joseph, let this pass! And you, woman, ask forgiveness for your sin. You have been seriously at fault.'" (Verses 28-29)

That is all he said: it is a matter of awesome feminine guile. It is an altogether too diplomatic approach to something that would make one's blood boil. The aristocratic lady is addressed in a very gentle way, with the question of seduction attributed to the female sex in general, with an overtone even of approval. No woman is offended when she is told, in comment on her action, that women's guile is awesome! Instead, she takes this as recognition of her full female status, able to match others with her guile.

As for Joseph, whose innocence is thus established, he is told to let the matter drop. He should not give it too much attention, and should not talk about it to others. This is the main point, so that appearances are maintained.

On the other hand, the woman who tried to seduce her slave and whose guilt is established through his torn shirt receives some admonition: *"Seek forgiveness for your sin. You have been seriously at fault."* (Verse 29)

The same sort of low morality is found in aristocratic classes and those close to government in all *jāhiliyyah* societies, with little difference in substance.

Thus the curtains are drawn and the whole incident is brought to a close. All this without using the sort of language usually associated with pornographic descriptions.

A Scandal Must be Hushed

The husband did not take any action to separate his wife and his slave. He simply let matters go on as previously, because this is how palaces deal with such affairs. But palaces are walls with ears, and gossip is always rife. For such scandals always provide interesting conversations: *"In the city, women were saying: 'The Chief Minister's wife is trying to seduce her slave lad, as she is passionately in love with him. We see that she is clearly going astray.'"* (Verse 30)

This is the sort of thing women say about such matters in all *jāhiliyyah* societies. For the first time we learn who the woman is, and we learn that the man who bought Joseph was Egypt's Chief Minister. This is announced as the scandal becomes public, with her position graphically described: *"The Chief Minister's wife is trying to seduce her slave lad, as she is passionately in love with him."* (Verse 30) Hers is a consuming love that takes complete hold. Hence the comment: *"We see that she is clearly going astray."* (Verse 30) She is supposed to be the role model as she is married to a leading personality in government. Yet she is infatuated with the young man her husband

had bought. Or perhaps they were merely commenting on the fact that she had become the centre of a scandal. It is not the offence itself that is reproachable, but of being found out doing it. If it remains concealed, no blame is attached.

Again we see something that happens only amongst the higher classes. We are shown a scene of that bold woman's further engineering: *"When she heard of their malicious talk, she sent for them, and prepared for them a sumptuous repast, and handed each one of them a knife and said (to Joseph): 'Come out and present yourself to them.' When they saw him, they were amazed at him, and they cut their hands, exclaiming: 'God preserve us! This is no mortal man! This is none other than a noble angel.' Said she: 'This is he on whose account you have been blaming me! Indeed I have tried to seduce him, but he guarded his chastity. Now, however, if he does not do what I bid him, he shall certainly be thrown in prison, and shall indeed be humiliated.'* (Verses 31-32)

She arranged for a banquet in her own palace, which suggests that the women so invited also belonged to the same milieu. It is women in such a class that are invited to a palace banquet. They are the ones who love such gentle appearances. It seems that as they ate, they reclined on cushions and couches, as was the custom in eastern countries. Hence, she prepared this repast, and gave a knife to each one of her guests. This also suggests that material civilization had attained a high standard in Egypt at the time. Luxurious life was at a high standard. The use of knives with a meal several thousand years ago is indicative of the level of luxury that obtained. But as they were engaged with cutting meat or peeling fruit, the hostess surprised her guests with Joseph's appearance. She instructed him to: *"Come out and present yourself to them."* (Verse 31) So what was their reaction? *"When they saw him, they were amazed at him."* They were taken by surprise. *"They cut their hands."* (Verse 31) In their surprise, they cut their hands. They uttered a word that is normally used to express amazement at God's wonderful creation. *"God preserve us! This is no mortal man! This is none other than a noble angel."* (Verse 31) These words also indicate that there were traces of the divine faith, based on God's oneness, in their community.

At this point she felt that she had scored her point and gained a victory over the women of her class. They could not stop their surprised admiration of Joseph. Victorious as she felt, she saw no need for modesty in front of these other women. Indeed she could boast that he was under her command. If he resisted her at one point, he could not do so forever. Hence, her statement: *"This is he on whose account you have been blaming me."* (Verse 32) You can see how handsome and manly he is, so much so that you cannot help admiring him: *"Indeed I have tried to seduce him, but he guarded his chastity."* (Verse 32)

She goes on to press the point that she was his mistress and that he would have to do as he was told. In that society, a woman in her position could afford to be boastful and arrogant. She could declare publicly in front of other women the sexual urge she

felt: *“Now, however, if he does not do what I bid him, he shall certainly be thrown in prison, and shall indeed be humiliated.”* (Verse 32)

What a mixture of temptation, persistence and threat. And this is coupled with a new phase of temptation hidden under a mask of warning.

What could Joseph do when he heard this said openly in a social gathering of women who were undoubtedly revealing their beauty and expressing their admiration of him. What was his attitude on hearing his mistress openly declare her intention to carry on attempting to seduce him? He simply turns to his Lord with this appeal: *“My Lord, I would sooner be put in prison than comply with what they are inviting me to do.”* (Verse 33)

We note here that Joseph did not say, ‘what *she is* inviting me to do’. They were all part of the seduction attempt, either by word, look or movement. He felt that the only way for him to evade their tricks was to appeal to his Lord. That would be the only way he would not yield to their temptation. Hence, he declares: *“Unless You turn away their guile from me, I may yield to them and lapse into folly.”* (Verse 33) This is a declaration by one who knows his own human weakness. He prays for more of God’s care and protection, because that is the best way to resist all temptation.

“His Lord answered his prayer and warded off their guile from him. It is He alone who hears all and knows all.” (Verse 34) This might have taken the form of making them despair of him ever yielding to their approaches and persuasion, or might have been in the shape of stronger resistance to their temptation.

“It is He alone who hears all and knows all.” (Verse 33) He hears their scheming, and Joseph’s prayers. He knows the intention behind the scheming and the purpose of the prayer.

Thus Joseph was able to stand firm through this second trial. He had to rely on God’s grace and good care to do so, and through this managed to avoid falling into sin. With this, the second episode in Joseph’s story is over.

From Prison to Palace

Yet for all the evidence they had seen, they felt it right to put him in jail for a time.
(35)

Two young men went to prison with him. One of them said: 'I saw myself [in a dream] pressing wine.' The other said: 'And I saw myself [in a dream] carrying bread on my head, and birds were eating of it.' 'Tell us the meaning of these dreams, for we can see that you are a man of virtue.' (36)

[Joseph] answered: 'Your food which is provided for you will not have come to you before I have informed you of the real meaning of [your dreams]. That is part of the knowledge which my Lord has imparted to me. I have left the faith of people who do not believe in God, and who

ثُمَّ بَدَا لَهُمْ مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا رَأَوْا الْآيَاتِ
لَيْسَ جُنُنَهُ حَتَّىٰ حِينٍ ﴿٣٥﴾

وَدَخَلَ مَعَهُ السِّجْنَ فَتَيَانٍ ۖ قَالَ
أَحَدُهُمَا إِنِّي أَرْنِي آعْصِرُ خَمْرًا ۖ وَقَالَ
الْآخَرُ إِنِّي أَرْنِي أَحْمِلُ فَوْقَ رَأْسِي خُبْزًا
تَأْكُلُ الطَّيْرُ مِنْهُ ۖ نَبِّئْنَا بِتَأْوِيلِهِ ۗ إِنَّا
نَرَاكَ مِنَ الْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿٣٦﴾

قَالَ لَا يَأْتِيكُمَا طَعَامٌ تُرْزَقَانِهِ إِلَّا
نَبَّأْتُكُمَا بِتَأْوِيلِهِ ۗ قَبْلَ أَنْ يَأْتِيكُمَا ۚ
ذَٰلِكُمَا مِمَّا عَلَّمَنِي رَبِّي ۚ إِنِّي تَرَكْتُ مِلَّةَ
قَوْمٍ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَهُمْ بِالْآخِرَةِ هُمْ
كَافِرُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

deny the truth of the life to come. (37)

I follow the faith of my forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is not for us to associate any partners with God. This is part of God's grace which He has bestowed on us and on all mankind, but most people do not give thanks. (38)

My two prison companions! Which is better: [to believe] in diverse lords, or to believe in God, the One who holds sway over all that exists? (39)

Those you worship instead of Him are nothing but names you and your fathers have invented, and for which God has given no sanction from on high. All judgement rests with God alone. He has ordained that you should worship none but Him. This is the true faith, but most people do not know it. (40)

My two prison companions! One of you will give his lord wine to drink. The other will be crucified, and the birds will eat from his head. The matter on which you have

وَاتَّبَعْتُ مِلَّةَ آبَائِي إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْحَاقَ
وَيَعْقُوبَ ۚ مَا كَانَ لَنَا أَنْ نَشْرِكَ بِاللَّهِ
مِنْ شَيْءٍ ۚ ذَلِكَ مِنْ فَضْلِ اللَّهِ عَلَيْنَا
وَعَلَى النَّاسِ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا
يَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٣٨﴾

يَصْنَعِي السِّجْنِ ۚ أَرَبَابٌ مُتَفَرِّقُونَ
خَيْرٌ أَمِ اللَّهُ الْوَاحِدُ الْقَهَّارُ ﴿٣٩﴾

مَا تَعْبُدُونَ مِنْ دُونِهِ ۚ إِلَّا أَسْمَاءُ
سَمَّيْتُمُوهَا أَنْتُمْ وَآبَاؤُكُمْ ۚ مَا أَنْزَلَ
اللَّهُ بِهَا مِنْ سُلْطَانٍ ۚ إِنَّ الْحُكْمَ إِلَّا لِلَّهِ ۚ أَمَرَ
إِلَّا تَعْبُدُوا ۚ إِلَّا إِيَّاهُ ۚ ذَلِكَ الدِّينُ الْقَيِّمُ
وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٤٠﴾

يَصْنَعِي السِّجْنِ ۚ أَمَّا أَحَدُكُمَا فَيَسْقِي
رَبَّهُ خَمْرًا ۖ وَأَمَّا الْآخَرُ فَيُصَلَّبُ
فَتَأْكُلُ الطَّيْرُ مِنْ رَأْسِهِ ۚ قُضِيَ الْأَمْرُ
الَّذِي فِيهِ تَسْتَفْتِيَانِ ﴿٤١﴾

sought to be enlightened has thus been decided.’ (41)

And [Joseph] said to the one whom he believed would be released: ‘Remember me in the presence of your lord.’ But Satan caused him to forget to mention Joseph to his lord, and so he remained in prison for several years. (42)

And the King said: ‘I saw [in a dream] seven fat cows being devoured by seven emaciated ones, and seven green ears of wheat next to seven others dry and withered. Tell me the meaning of my vision, my nobles, if you are able to interpret dreams.’ (43)

They replied: ‘This is but a medley of dreams, and we have no deep knowledge of the real meaning of dreams.’ (44)

At that point, the man who had been released from prison suddenly remembered [Joseph] after all that time and said: ‘I will tell you the real meaning of this dream, so give me leave to go.’ (45)

Joseph, man of truth, tell us of the seven fat cows being devoured by seven emaciated

وَقَالَ لِلَّذِي ظَنَّ أَنَّهُ نَاجٍ مِّنْهُمَا
أذْكَرُنِي عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ فَآنَسَدَهُ الشَّيْطَانُ
ذِكْرَ رَبِّهِ فَلَبِثَ فِي السِّجْنِ بِضْعَ
سِنِينَ ﴿٤٢﴾

وَقَالَ الْمَلِكُ إِنِّي أَرَى سَبْعَ بَقَرَاتٍ
سِمَانٍ يَأْكُلُهُنَّ سَبْعٌ عِجَافٌ وَسَبْعَ
سُنبُلَاتٍ خُضْرٍ وَأُخَرَ يَابِسَاتٍ يَا أَيُّهَا
الْمَلَأُ أَفْتُونِي فِي رُؤْيَايَ إِن كُنْتُمْ لِلرُّؤْيَا
تَعْبُرُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

قَالُوا أَضْغَثٌ أَحْلَمٍ وَمَا نَحْنُ بِتَأْوِيلِ
الْأَحْلَمِ بِعَلَمِينَ ﴿٤٤﴾

وَقَالَ الَّذِي نَجَا مِنْهُمَا وَادَّكَرَ بَعْدَ أُمَّةٍ أَنَا
أُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِتَأْوِيلِهِ فَأَرْسِلُونِ ﴿٤٥﴾

يُوسُفُ أَيُّهَا الصِّدِّيقُ أَفْتِنَا فِي سَبْعِ بَقَرَاتٍ
سِمَانٍ يَأْكُلُهُنَّ سَبْعٌ عِجَافٌ وَسَبْعِ
سُنبُلَاتٍ خُضْرٍ وَأُخَرَ يَابِسَاتٍ لَعَلِّي أَرْجِعُ

ones, and seven green ears of wheat next to seven others dry and withered, so that I may return to the people [of the court], and that they would come to know.' (46)

He replied: 'You shall sow for seven consecutive years, but let the grain you harvest remain in its ear, except for the little which you may eat. (47)

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. (48)

Then after that there will come a year of abundant rain, in which the people will be able to press [oil and wine]. (49)

The King said: 'Bring this man before me.' But when the [King's] envoy came to him, Joseph said: 'Go back to your lord and ask him about the women who cut their hands. My Lord has full knowledge of their guile.' (50)

The King asked [the women]: 'What was the matter with you when you tried to seduce Joseph?' The women said: 'God save us! We did not perceive the least evil on his part.' The Chief Minister's wife said: Now

إِلَى النَّاسِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٤٦﴾

قَالَ تَزْرَعُونَ سَبْعَ سِنِينَ دَأْبًا فَمَا
حَصَدْتُمْ فَذَرُوهُ فِي سُنْبُلِهِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا
مِمَّا تَأْكُلُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

ثُمَّ يَأْتِي مِنْ بَعْدِ ذَلِكَ سَبْعٌ شِدَادٌ يَأْكُلْنَ
مَا قَدَّمْتُمْ لَهُنَّ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا مِمَّا تَحْصِنُونَ
﴿٤٨﴾

ثُمَّ يَأْتِي مِنْ بَعْدِ ذَلِكَ عَامٌ فِيهِ يُغَاثُ
النَّاسُ وَفِيهِ يَعْصِرُونَ ﴿٤٩﴾

وَقَالَ الْمَلِكُ أَتْتُونِي بِهِ ۖ فَلَمَّا جَاءَهُ
الرَّسُولُ قَالَ أَرْجِعْ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ فَسْأَلْهُ مَا
بِالْنِسْوَةِ الَّتِي قَطَّعْنَ أَيْدِيَهُنَّ ۚ إِنَّ رَبِّي
بِكَيْدِهِنَّ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٥٠﴾

قَالَ مَا خَطْبُكُنَّ إِذْ رَاوَدْتُنَّ يُوسُفَ عَنِ
نَفْسِهِ ۗ قُلْنَ حَاشَ لِلَّهِ مَا عَلِمْنَا عَلَيْهِ
مِنْ سُوءٍ ۗ قَالَتِ امْرَأَتُ الْعَزِيزِ الْكُنْ

has the truth come to light. It was I who tried to seduce him. He has indeed told the truth. (51)

From this he will know that I did not betray him behind his back, and that God does not bless with His guidance the schemes of those who betray their trust. (52)

And yet, I am not trying to claim to be free of sin. Indeed man's soul does incite him to evil, except for those upon whom God has bestowed His mercy. My Lord is Much-Forgiving, Merciful.' (53)

And the King said: 'Bring him before me. I will choose him for my own.' And when he had spoken to him, the King said: 'You shall henceforth be in a position of high standing with us, invested with all trust.' (54)

Joseph replied: 'Give me charge of the storehouses of the land. I am able to look after them with wisdom.' (55)

Thus did We establish Joseph in the land, free to do what he willed. We bestow Our mercy on whom We will, and We never fail to give their reward to those who do good.

حَصْحَصَ الْحَقُّ أَنَا رَاودْتُهُ عَنْ نَفْسِهِ

وَإِنَّهُ لَمِنَ الصَّادِقِينَ ﴿٥١﴾

ذَلِكَ لِيَعْلَمَ أَنِّي لَمْ أَخُنْهُ بِالْغَيْبِ وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ

لَا يَهْدِي كَيْدَ الْخَائِبِينَ ﴿٥٢﴾

﴿٥٣﴾ وَمَا أُبْرِيُ نَفْسِي ۚ إِنَّ النَّفْسَ لَأَمَّارَةٌ

بِالسُّوْءِ إِلَّا مَا رَحِمَ رَبِّي ۚ إِنَّ رَبِّي غَفُورٌ

رَحِيمٌ ﴿٥٤﴾

وَقَالَ الْمَلِكُ أَتُؤْنِي بِهِ ۚ أَسْتَخْلِصُهُ

لِنَفْسِي ۖ فَلَمَّا كَلَّمَهُ قَالَ إِنَّكَ الْيَوْمَ

لَدَيْنَا مَكِينٌ أُمِينٌ ﴿٥٥﴾

قَالَ أَجْعَلْنِي عَلَىٰ خَزَائِنِ الْأَرْضِ ۗ إِنِّي

حَفِيظٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٥٥﴾

وَكَذَلِكَ مَكَّنَّا لِيُوسُفَ فِي الْأَرْضِ يَتَّبِعُونَ

مِنْهَا حَيْثُ يَشَاءُ ۚ نُنِيبُ بِرَحْمَتِنَا مَنْ

نَشَاءُ ۗ وَلَا نُضِيعُ أَجْرَ الْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿٥٦﴾

(56)

But as for those who believe in God and keep away from evil, the reward of the life to come is much better indeed. (57)

وَلَا جُرْأَلَاخِرَةَ حَيْرٌ لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَكَانُوا

يَتَّقُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

Overview

This third episode of Joseph's story witnesses yet another trial he has to endure. It is the third and final test of hardship in his life. What comes after this is good fortune which also constitutes a test of his perseverance. The present trial sees him thrown in jail after his innocence has been established. When an innocent person is put in prison, he finds it especially difficult, although he can console himself that he has committed no crime.

During Joseph's trial we see an aspect of the grace God bestows on him as He gives him knowledge which enables him to interpret dreams and visions, and gives him the ability to explain forthcoming events on the basis of indications he may see. Then God's grace is further bestowed on him when he is declared innocent in the presence of the King. His abilities are also recognized, giving him the chance to assume high position, coupled with the King's trust and wide powers.

An Innocent Man Goes to Prison

"Yet for all the evidence they had seen, they felt it right to put him in jail for a time." (Verse 35) Such is the type of action taken in palaces. It is the action typical of the aristocracy, despotic regimes and social conditions reflecting a state of ignorance or *jāhiliyyah*. When all the signs point to Joseph's innocence, the decision is taken to put him in prison. What a travesty of justice. The Chief Minister's wife behaves with no sense of shame, throwing a party and inviting women of her class to show them the young man, Joseph. She then declares in public her infatuation with him. They experience the same feelings and so too try to tempt him. Joseph's only recourse in the face of such tantalizing appeals is to turn to his Lord for protection. His mistress declares, shamelessly, before the other women that he will have to do as he is told or else be thrown in prison where he is sure to be humiliated. His choice is prison, and ultimately this is what occurs.

Despite all this, the decision is made to imprison him. Most probably by this time the woman has despaired of him responding to her attempts. Moreover, it must have

become the subject of conversation among the public, and not confined to the aristocracy. It was, therefore, necessary to protect the reputation of high class families. Since the men in these families have been unable to safeguard their own reputation and that of their women, they are certainly able to throw a young man in prison, knowing that he has committed no offence other than not responding to the temptation of an aristocratic woman. After all, it is his resistance of temptation that made her the talk of all classes.

A Platform to Advocate True Faith

“Two young men went to prison with him.” (Verse 36) We will presently know that they belonged to the King’s private staff.

The *sūrah* does not dwell on what happened to Joseph in prison, and how he was recognized as a man of integrity and kindness, and that he soon won the trust of all those around him. There must also have been quite a few among them who had had the misfortune to work in the palace or for courtiers, yet had incurred the anger of their masters for one reason or another, and, as a result, were now in jail. All this is omitted. For the *sūrah* immediately moves on to portray a scene of Joseph, in prison, speaking to two young men who had found him to be a man of wisdom. They related their dreams to him, requesting that he interpret them.

One of them said: I saw myself [in a dream] pressing wine.’ The other said: And I saw myself [in a dream] carrying bread on my head, and birds were eating of it.’ ‘Tell us the meaning of these dreams, for we can see that you are a man of virtue.’ (Verse 36)

Joseph seizes the opportunity to speak to the prisoners about his faith, which is the true faith. The fact that he is in prison does not exempt him from his duty to preach the true faith and to criticize any situation that assigns lordship to human rulers. For submission to such rulers means that they usurp the rights of lordship and become pharaohs.

Joseph starts at the point which preoccupies his fellow prisoners. He reassures them that he will give them the correct interpretation of their dreams because his Lord has given him special knowledge as a result of his dedication in worshipping Him alone and his associating no partners with Him. In this way Joseph makes it clear that he follows the faith of his forefathers who were similarly dedicated. At the very outset then, he wins their trust, stating that he will rightly interpret their dreams. At the same time he also presents his faith in appealing guise.

[Joseph] answered: ‘Your food which is provided for you will not have come to you

before I have informed you of the real meaning of [your dreams]. That is part of the knowledge which my Lord has imparted to me. I have left the faith of people who do not believe in God, and who deny the truth of the life to come. I follow the faith of my forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is not for us to associate any partners with God. This is part of God's grace which He has bestowed on us and on all mankind, but most people do not give thanks.' (Verses 37-38)

The approach Joseph employs is particularly appealing. He is pleasant to listen to, moving from one aspect to the next in a relaxed, easy way. This is characteristic of Joseph throughout the story.

The first part of his statement is emphatic, inspiring confidence that he has divine knowledge whereby he is informed of what is coming and he tells it as he sees it. This indicates that what he knows is a gift given to him by God for his sincere devotion. Moreover, it is fitting with what was fashionable at the time, since prophesying was a common practice. However, his assertion that it is all taught to him by his Lord is made at the most appropriate moment so as to make them more receptive to his call on them to believe in God.

"I have left the faith of people who do not believe in God, and who deny the truth of the life to come." (Verse 37) This refers to the people who raised him in Egypt, in the Chief Minister's home, and to the courtiers and aristocracy who hold sway in society. Needless to say, the two young men whom he was addressing followed the same religion as the rest of their people. Joseph does not, however, confront them with this fact, but rather speaks about people in general so that they are not embarrassed. This demonstrates Joseph's delicacy in approaching the subject and his choice of proper method to introduce his faith.

Joseph's mention of the hereafter at this point confirms, as stated earlier, that belief in the Day of Judgement has always been a fundamental concept of faith, preached by all God's messengers and prophets right from the beginning of human life. It is false to assume, as teachers of comparative religion do, that it is a recent concept in human faith in general. It may have been introduced at a late stage into pagan religions, but it has always been an essential concept of divine messages.

Joseph continues to outline the distinctive characteristics of false beliefs in order to highlight those of the true faith which he and his forefathers have followed. *"I follow the faith of my forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is not for us to associate any partners with God."* (Verse 38) It is a faith based on the concept of God's oneness. Indeed it is part of God's grace to mankind that they are guided to believe in His oneness. To enjoy this aspect of God's grace is easy. Mankind have only to decide to accept it and it is theirs, because this belief is ingrained in their nature and in the universe around them. It is also explained in all divine messages. It is only human beings who choose

to ignore it and not thank God for it. *“This is part of God’s grace which He has bestowed on us and on all mankind, but most people do not give thanks.”* (Verse 38)

A Comparison of Beliefs

Joseph’s approach is subtle, taking them carefully step by step before going deep into their hearts to reveal his faith plainly and completely. He couples this with an explanation that the misery they suffer in life is due to the false beliefs which they and their people generally hold. *“My two prison companions! Which is better: [to believe] in diverse lords, or to believe in God, the One who holds sway over all that exists? Those you worship instead of Him are nothing but names you and your fathers have invented, and for which God has given no sanction from on high. All judgement rests with God alone. He has ordained that you should worship none but Him. This is the true faith, but most people do not know it.”* (Verses 39-40)

In a few clear, lucid and enlightening words, Joseph outlines the main features of the true faith based on the oneness of God. He shakes violently the whole structure of polytheism and the very concept of associating partners with God.

“My two prison companions! Which is better: [to believe] in diverse lords, or to believe in God, the One who holds sway over all that exists?” (Verse 39) Joseph makes them his companions, drawing them close with his affable approach. This facilitates an easy way into the main subject, namely the essence of faith. He does not call on them directly to adopt it, but instead presents it as a subject for objective discussion: *“Which is better: [to believe] in diverse lords, or to believe in God, the One who holds sway over all that exists?”* The question makes a direct and strong appeal to human nature which recognizes only one deity. How come that several beings are described as gods when the one who deserves to be Lord and to be worshipped and obeyed in all that He orders is the One who has complete sway over all beings. He is the One whose law must be implemented in life. When God is declared to be One and His absolute power in the universe is recognized, then Lordship must be declared to belong to the One Lord whose power over people’s lives must also be recognized. It should never happen that people who recognize God as One and Almighty, then accept someone else as having power over them, effectively making him a lord beside God. The Lord must be God who has absolute control over the whole universe. Anyone who does not have such power cannot be taken as lord and given power over people’s lives. If he cannot make the universe submit to his will, he must not be the one to whom people submit.

It is infinitely better that people should submit to God and acknowledge Him as their only Lord than that they submit to diverse, ignorant and powerless lords which they invent for themselves. This description applies to all lords other than God. No

misery that has ever been suffered by mankind is greater than that caused by acknowledging a multiplicity of lords to each of whom a section of humanity submits. These earthly lords either usurp God's power and authority directly, or are given such power and authority by ignorant human beings who may be influenced by superstition or legend. It is also true that people can be overpowered or tricked into such submission. These earthly lords cannot rid themselves for a moment of their own selfish desires, or their urge to ensure their own survival and the maintenance of their power and authority. Hence, they seek to destroy all forces and elements that constitute even the slightest threat to their power and authority. They employ all means and mobilize all resources to glorify themselves so that their power continues to be acknowledged by the masses.

God Almighty is in no need of anyone. He does not want anything from His servants other than righteousness and that they work for their own betterment, and to build human life in accordance with the code He has laid down. He then considers all this part of their worship. Even the worship rites He requires them to observe aim at keeping them on the right track, ensuring that they conduct their lives properly. Indeed He is in no need of any of His servants. *"Mankind, it is you who stand in need of God, and God is All Sufficient, Glorious."* (35: 15)

Joseph then takes another step to demonstrate the falsehood of their idolatrous beliefs: *"Those you worship instead of Him are nothing but names you and your fathers have invented, and for which God has given no sanction from on high."* (Verse 40) These lords, whether they be human or non-human, spirits, devils, angels or forces of the universe that operate by God's will are not real lords. Indeed they have nothing of the qualities of lordship. Lordship belongs to God alone, the One who has power over all things, and who creates and controls all. But in all ignorant societies, people invent names and attribute to them qualities and characteristics. The first of these is that of judgement and authority. But God has not given any authority to them, nor has He sanctioned what people invent.

To Whom Judgement Belongs

At this point Joseph makes his final and decisive point, making it clear to his interlocutors where all power and judgement lie, and to whom obedience is owed and how it must be acknowledged. Or, in short, to whom worship should be offered: *"All judgement rests with God alone. He has ordained that you should worship none but Him. This is the true faith, but most people do not know it."* (Verse 40)

Judgement and authority belong to no one other than God. It is He who is the Godhead, with authority to legislate and judge. Indeed, sovereignty, belongs to Him, for sovereignty is one of God's basic attributes. Whoever claims any right to it is

indeed disputing God's power, whether the claimant be an individual, a class, a party, an organization, a community or an international organization representing mankind. Anyone who claims this very basic attribute of God's for himself disbelieves in God. His disbelief is in the form of denying a part of faith which is essentially and universally known as a fact.

Usurping the rights of sovereignty which belong to God alone does not come in one form only. For a person to claim the basic characteristic of Godhead, which is sovereignty, he need not be so crude as to say, 'I know no God whom you may worship other than myself,' or, 'I am your Lord, the Most High,' as Pharaoh did. He actually claims these rights disputing God's authority when he starts to derive laws from any source other than God's law, declaring that the source of power and authority belongs to some institution or being other than God. Even when that institution is the whole nation or all humanity, the result is the same. In the Islamic system, the nation selects the ruler, giving him the authority to govern in accordance with God's law. The nation, or the community, is not the source of sovereignty which enacts the law and gives it its power. The source of sovereignty is God. Many are those who confuse the exercise of power and its source. This confusion is found even among Muslim scholars. What we say is that human beings, in their total aggregate, do not have the right of sovereignty. They only implement what God has legislated. What He has not legislated has no legitimacy. It does not carry God's sanction.

Joseph (peace be upon him) justifies his statement that all sovereignty belongs to God alone by saying: "*All judgement rests with God alone. He has ordained that you should worship none but Him.*" (Verse 40) We cannot understand this justification as the Arabs did at the time of the revelation of the Qur'ān unless we understand the meaning of 'worship' which can only be offered to God.

The meaning of the verb, *`abada*, or 'to worship' in Arabic is 'to submit or surrender'. In the early days of Islam it never meant, in Islamic terminology, only 'to offer worship rituals'. In fact none of the worship rituals was as yet imposed as a duty. So the statement was rather understood in the manner it was meant linguistically, and this later became its Islamic meaning. What it meant then was submission to God alone, and obeying His orders and commands, whether they related to worship rituals, moral directives or legal provisions. To submit to God in all these was the essence of worship which must be addressed to God alone. It could never be addressed to any of His creatures.

When we understand the meaning of worship in this light, we understand why Joseph stated that worship can only be addressed to God as his justification for saying that all judgement and sovereignty belong to Him alone. Submission to God will not become a reality if judgement and sovereignty belong to someone else. This applies to matters where God's will is done by the laws of nature which God has set

in operation in the universe, and to matters where human beings have a choice with regard to their actions and practices. True submission to God applies in both areas.

Once more we say that to dispute God's right of sovereignty takes the disputant out of the religion of Islam altogether. This is a basic rule of Islam that is essentially known to all. This is because disputing God's right and authority means a rejection of worshipping Him alone. It is essentially an act of associating partners with God, which means that those who dispute God's rights of sovereignty are not Muslims at all. The same applies to those who approve their claims and obey them without rejecting, even mentally, their action of usurping God's right and authority. The claimant and those who obey him are the same in the Islamic view.

Joseph (peace be upon him) states that the true faith is that which assigns all judgement to God alone in implementation of His being the only one to be worshipped. *"This is the true faith."* (Verse 40) This is a statement of limitation. No faith can be true unless it gives all sovereignty to God and makes this a practical implementation of worshipping Him alone.

"But most people do not know it." (Verse 40) The fact that they do not know does not make them followers of the true faith. A person who does not know something cannot believe in it or implement it. If people do not know the essence of faith, it is illogical to say that they follow it. Their ignorance is not an excuse for describing them as Muslims. Rather, their ignorance bars them from that characteristic in the first place. To believe in something presupposes knowing it. That is a basic, logical fact.

In a few clear words Joseph (peace be upon him) outlines his faith completely, showing all its constituent elements and shaking to the core the foundations of disbelief, polytheism and tyranny.

Tyranny cannot take place in any land without its claiming the most essential quality of Godhead, namely His lordship over people's lives. This is the right to make people submit to its laws and orders, and implement its ideology. Even if it does not say so in words, it actually practises it. Tyranny does not exist unless the true faith has been removed from people's thoughts and lives. For only when people firmly believe that all sovereignty and judgement belong to God alone, because worship belongs to Him, is there no room left for tyranny in their lives.

At this point Joseph has completed his task of preaching God's faith to them, having attached it initially to the matter which preoccupied them. He therefore reverts to that point and interprets their dreams for them, so that their trust in what he says is strengthened, and they are more amenable to what he preaches: *"My two prison companions! One of you will give his lord wine to drink. The other will be crucified, and the birds will eat from his head."* (Verse 41) He does not point out directly who will

be released and who will meet the depressing end as he does not want to confront anyone with bad news. He stresses that he is certain of the knowledge imparted to him by God: *"The matter on which you have sought to be enlightened has thus been decided."* (Verse 41) It will only be as God has decreed. There is no escape from it.

Joseph was an innocent prisoner, jailed on the strength of false accusations, without any proper investigation of his case. It may be that the incident of the Chief Minister's wife and the other women was portrayed to the King in a way that totally misrepresented the facts, as often happens in such cases. It was only natural then that Joseph wanted his case to be put to the King in the hope that he would order that it be looked into properly. Hence, Joseph *"said to the one whom he believed would be released: 'Remember me in the presence of your lord.'"* (Verse 42) He actually asked him to mention his case and situation to the King and to tell him of the truth he had seen in him. He describes him as his lord because he was the ruler to whom he submitted. The term 'lord' here means 'master, ruler, a person of acknowledged authority and a legislator'. This re-emphasizes the meaning of lordship in Islamic terminology.

At this point, the *sūrah* leaves out mentioning that the two prisoners' dreams came true in exactly the manner Joseph described. There is a gap here, as well as an implication that it is sufficient for us to know that all this took place. The prisoner whom Joseph felt would be released was actually released, but he did not act on what Joseph requested. He forgot all the lessons that Joseph had taught him. He forgot to remember his true Lord as he was distracted by the demands of life in the palace after he returned there. Indeed, he forgot all about Joseph: *"But Satan caused him to forget to mention Joseph to his lord, and so he remained in prison for several years."* (Verse 42)

The pronoun 'he' in the last clause refers to Joseph. God wanted to teach him a lesson so that he would sever all ties in favour of his tie with God Himself. Hence, He did not make the achievement of what he wanted dependent on any human being or on anything relating to a human being. This is an aspect of the honour God gave Joseph. God's true servants should be totally dedicated to Him. They must leave all decisions concerning their lives to God alone. When human weakness initially makes this impossible, He bestows on them His grace and makes them unable to adopt a different attitude so that they know its blessing. They are then able to accept it out of love and obedience to God. He then gives them more of His blessings and grace.

The King's Dream

Now we move into the court with the King asking his courtiers and priests to interpret a disturbing dream he had had: *"And the King said: I saw [in a dream] seven fat cows being devoured by seven emaciated ones, and seven green ears of wheat next to seven*

others dry and withered. Tell me the meaning of my vision, my nobles, if you are able to interpret dreams.' They replied: 'This is but a medley of dreams, and we have no deep knowledge of the real meaning of dreams.'" (Verses 43-44)

None could offer a plausible interpretation of the King's dream. Or they might have felt that it signalled something unpleasant and hence did not wish to put it to the King. This is often the attitude of courtiers and advisors who prefer to deliver to their masters only that which is pleasant. Hence they said that it is all *'but a medley of dreams.'* They described it as disturbed visions that did not constitute a proper dream. They followed this by saying, *"We have no deep knowledge of the real meaning of dreams,"* i.e. when they are so blurred and confused.

So far we have mentioned three dream incidents: the first was Joseph's, the second was those of the two young men in prison and now we have the King's dream. Each time interpretation was requested. That so much emphasis was placed on dreams tells us something about the atmosphere that prevailed in Egypt and elsewhere.

At this point, Joseph's prison companion who was released remembered him and how he accurately interpreted his own dream and that of his fellow prisoner. *"At that point, the man who had been released from prison suddenly remembered [Joseph] after all that time and said: I will tell you the real meaning of this dream, so give me leave to go."* (Verse 45)

The King's Dream Interpreted

He requests leave to go and see the man who was certain to give a true interpretation of the dream no one else dared interpret. The curtains drop here, and when they are raised again we are in the prison looking at Joseph and his former companion asking him to interpret the King's dream: *"Joseph, man of truth, tell us of the seven fat cows being devoured by seven emaciated ones, and seven green ears of wheat next to seven others dry and withered, so that I may return to the people [of the court], and that they would come to know."* (Verse 46)

The man, who is the drink master of the King, calls Joseph a *'man of truth,'* which is testimony that Joseph always tells the truth according to the man's own experience with him. *"Tell us of the seven fat cows..."* Here the man quotes the King's own words in relating the dream. Since he was asking for an interpretation of the dream, he had to quote the description accurately. The *sūrah* uses the same words again to indicate the accuracy of the reporting, and to enable the interpretation to immediately follow the statement.

However, what Joseph gives is not a passive interpretation of the dream. Instead it is coupled with advice on how best to cope with the consequences of what is going to

happen. *"He replied: 'You shall sow for seven consecutive years.'" (Verse 47)* These are seven years without a gap when there is a rich harvest. Hence they are depicted in the dream as seven fat cows. *"But let the grain you harvest remain in its ear," (Verse 47)* because that would protect the crop against insects and atmospheric effects that may cause it to decay. *"Except for the little which you may eat." (Verse 47)* What you need for eating you may take out of its ear. The rest must be stored for the following seven years of poor harvest which are depicted in the dream as seven emaciated cows.

"Then after that there will come seven hard years," (Verse 48) when the land produces little or nothing. Hence these hard years *"will devour all that you have laid up for them except a little of what you have kept in store." (Verse 48)* It is as if these years are the ones which do the devouring themselves. Their lack of harvest is described here as hunger. And they will eat all except a little which is kept from them.

"Then after that there will come a year of abundant rain, in which the people will be able to press [oil and wine]." (Verse 49) This brings to an end the hard years without harvest. They are followed by a year of abundance when people will have plenty of water and a plentiful harvest. Their vineyards will yield richly and they will be able to press their wine. They will have plenty of sesame and olives which they will then press into oil.

We note here that this plentiful year is not symbolized in the King's dream. Joseph mentions it, however, on the basis of the knowledge given to him by God. He gives the happy news of the approach of this year to the man who will transmit it to the King and the people. They will be happier that the seven hard years will be followed by a year of rich harvest.

Court Summons

At this point the *sūrah* again moves to the next scene, leaving a gap between the one just ending and the one about to begin. What happens during this gap is left for us to imagine. The curtains are then once again raised in the King's palace. The *sūrah* leaves out what the man tells of the interpretation of the King's dream, and what he says about Joseph, his imprisonment and its cause, and his present situation. What we have instead is the effect of all this, embodied in the King's expressed desire to see him and his order that he should be brought before him.

"The King said: 'Bring this man before me.'" (Verse 50) Again the *sūrah* leaves out the details of carrying out the King's order. We simply find Joseph replying to the King's emissary. He has spent so long in prison that he is in no hurry to leave until his case has been properly investigated. He wants the truth to be clearly known and his innocence to be declared to all people. All the false accusations hurled at him must be known for what they were: mere lies. He has been looked after by his Lord, and the

way he has been brought up gives him reassurance and peace of mind. He is in no hurry until the truth is known.

The impact of the care God has taken of Joseph in bringing him up is clearly seen in the difference between his present attitude and his earlier one. Formerly, he had asked his prison companion to remember him to his master. Now he wants his innocence to be established first. Hence he says to the King's emissary: *"Go back to your lord and ask him about the women who cut their hands."* (Verse 50) The gulf between these two situations is great indeed.

Joseph refused to go to the King until the latter had investigated his case. He specifically mentions the women who cut their hands so that the circumstances leading to this, and what happened later will all be revealed. Moreover, he wanted all this to be done before leaving prison, so that the whole truth be known and without him having to question the women himself. He could afford to do this because he was absolutely certain of his own innocence, reassured that the truth would not be suppressed.

The Qur'ān quotes Joseph using the term, *Rabb*, or Lord, in its full meaning with regard to himself and to the King's messenger. The King is the messenger's lord, because he is his master whom he obeys, while God is Joseph's Lord whom Joseph obeys and submits to.

The messenger went back to the King and reported Joseph's reply. The King called in the women and interrogated them. The *sūrah* leaves this out, allowing us to know its conclusion: *"The King asked [the women]: 'What was the matter with you when you tried to seduce Joseph?'"* (Verse 51)

Justice Must Be Seen to Be Done

The Qur'ānic text uses a term much stronger than that expressed by the phrase, 'What was the matter with you.' It is much more like 'what calamity came over you.' It appears that the King asked for full information about the matter before he called them in. This the King did so that he would be appraised of the circumstances before he spoke to them. When they are brought before him, his question points an accusing finger, saying that something really serious must have happened: *"What was the matter with you when you tried to seduce Joseph?"* (Verse 51)

The King's very question tells us something about what happened on that day at the Chief Minister's house. We gather something of what the women said to Joseph, or hinted at, trying to tempt him into seduction.

When faced with such an accusation in the presence of the King, the women felt that they could no longer deny the facts: *"The women said. God save us! We did not*

perceive the least evil on his part." (Verse 51) That is the truth that could not be denied, even by them. Joseph was so innocent that no one could realistically accuse him of any misdeed.

At this point, the woman who loved Joseph and could not rid herself of such love, despite her despair of him ever succumbing to her guile, comes forward to confess all in a very frank statement: *"The Chief Minister's wife said: Now has the truth come to light. It was I who tried to seduce him. He has indeed told the truth."* (Verse 51) It is a full confession admitting her guilt and his commitment to telling the truth.

She goes even further to reveal that she still has a soft spot for him, hoping that she will gain his respect after all that time. There is a further hint that his faith had found its way into her heart and that she believed in it: *"From this he will know that I did not betray him behind his back, and that God does not bless with His guidance the schemes of those who betray their trust."*¹ (Verse 52)

Her confession and what comes after is described here in highly charged but refined words which tell us much about the feelings behind it. *"It was I who tried to seduce him. He has indeed told the truth."* (Verse 51) This is a full testimony of his innocence and his having always said the truth. The woman does not mind what happens to her as a result of her confession. Was it then only the truth that she knew which prompted her to deliver that full confession in the presence of the King and nobles of the state?

The text of the *sūrah* implies a different motive. It suggests she was keen to win the respect of a man who is full of faith, and who paid no attention to her physical beauty. She now wanted that he respect her for her faith and honesty in giving a true account of his personality in his absence: *"From this he will know that I did not betray him behind his back."* (Verse 52) She carries on with a moral statement of the type Joseph loves and appreciates: *"God does not bless with His guidance the schemes of those who betray their trust."* (Verse 52)

She even goes a step further to express her new virtuous feelings: *"And yet, I am not trying to claim to be free of sin. Indeed man's soul does incite him to evil, except for those upon whom God has bestowed His mercy. My Lord is Much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 53) She was a woman in love. She was several years his senior. Her hopes depended largely on a word from him or a feeling of pleasure that she might feel he entertained.

¹ In translating this verse and the one that follows we have conformed to the author's interpretation which attributes them as statements made by the Chief Minister's wife. This is certainly a valid interpretation. However, many scholars express the view that these two verses quote a statement made by Joseph, declaring his innocence of any betrayal of his master's trust, acknowledging his human susceptibilities and stating some of the principles of his divine faith. — Editor's note.

Thus the human element in the story becomes apparently clear. The story is not told as a work of art and literature, but it is given as a lesson which believers may learn. It tackles the question of faith and its advocacy. The artistic style of the *sūrah* gives a colourful and vivid account of feelings and reactions as it tells of events in an environment where varied influences and circumstances play parts that produce a harmonious effect on the main characters.

Joseph's imprisonment is over. His life now takes a different course, where the trial is one of ease and comfort, not hardship.

A Great Turn in Joseph's Fortunes

And the King said: 'Bring him before me. I will choose him for my own.' And when he had spoken to him, the King said: 'You shall henceforth be in a position of high standing with us, invested with all trust.' Joseph replied: 'Give me charge of the store-houses of the land. I am able to look after them with wisdom.' Thus did We establish Joseph in the land, free to do what he willed. We bestow Our mercy on whom We will, and We never fail to give their reward to those who do good. But as for those who believe in God and keep away from evil, the reward of the life to come is much better indeed. (Verses 54-57)

The King established Joseph's innocence. He also learnt how adept Joseph was in the interpretation of dreams, and how wise he was when he requested an investigation of the women's behaviour. The King also learnt that Joseph was a man of dignity. He did not rush to leave the prison and meet the King of Egypt. He took the stand of an honourable man who had been wrongfully imprisoned. He wanted to prove the falsehood of the accusation even before his release. He wanted to re-establish his integrity and the truth of his faith before seeking any position of favour with the King.

His dignified attitude as a man of integrity and wisdom earned him the King's love and respect. Hence, the King ordered: "*Bring him before me. I will choose him for my own.*" (Verse 54) He does not want him brought before him so that he can release him, or just to know this learned interpreter of dreams, or to grant him audience and tell him that he is pleased with him. He wants him brought to him so that he can choose him for his own and make him a trusted advisor and even a friend.

There are those who are accused of no crime and have full freedom, who shed their dignity at the feet of rulers. They put a leash around their own necks, eagerly seeking a glimpse of satisfaction or a word of praise which keeps them as servants, not trusted advisors. I wish to God that such people would read the Qur'an and Joseph's story so that they would know that dignity and honour bring much more

profit, even material profit, than can ever be gained through humiliating themselves before rulers and tyrants.

“The King said: ‘Bring him before me. I will choose him for my own.’” (Verse 54) The text of the *sūrah* leaves out the details of how the King’s new order was carried out. Instead, we find ourselves looking at the scene of Joseph and the King: *“And when he had spoken to him, the King said: ‘You shall henceforth be in a position of high standing with us, invested with all trust.’”* (Verse 54) When the King speaks to him, he is certain that the impression he has had of him is a true one. Hence he assures him that he has a position with the King himself. He is no longer a Hebrew slave, but a man of high standing. He is no longer the accused, but one who is invested with trust. Such a position of trust and security are also with the King himself. So, what does Joseph say in response?

He does not prostrate himself before the King in a gesture of gratitude as do courtiers who strive to win a tyrant’s pleasure. He does not say to him may you live long and I always be your obedient servant, as those who vie for a tyrant’s favour do. He only asks to be entrusted with the task he feels himself to be the best to discharge in the forthcoming period of hardship and of which he has warned the King by interpreting his dream for him. He feels that if he is entrusted with this task he will save the country from ruin and save many lives. He recognized that the situation needed his expert planning, efficiency, honesty and integrity. Hence he said to the King: *“Give me charge of the store-houses of the land. I am able to look after them with wisdom.”* (Verse 55)

The anticipated years of crisis, preceded by seven years of bumper harvests, required good management, with strict control over agriculture, managing the surplus harvest and ensuring its sound storage so that it did not decay. Joseph mentions the two qualities he possesses which he thinks the task requires: *“I am able to look after them with wisdom.”* (Verse 55) It should be noted that Joseph did not ask a personal favour from the King. This was not the time to make personal gain. Instead, he asked for that which would help the country and its people. He requests a position of very difficult responsibilities which people would rather steer away from, because it could easily cost them their careers or their lives. Hunger encourages lawlessness. A hungry multitude could easily tear apart those in power at a moment of confusion and trouble.

Soliciting a High Position

Nonetheless Joseph’s request appears to violate two principles of the Islamic code. The first is a request of position, which is not allowed in Islam, as the Prophet says: *“We do not give a position [of government] to anyone who asks for it.”* [Related by

al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] The second is praising oneself, which runs contrary to the Qur'ānic instruction: "*Do not pretend to purity.*" (53: 32) However, such rules were established by the Islamic system laid down at the time of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him). Hence they did not apply during Joseph's time. Besides, this is only a matter of organization and administration, and such matters are not necessarily the same in all messages sent by God, and they do not apply equally to all communities that accept divine guidance.

Valid as this defence of Joseph's request is, we do not wish to rely on it. The matter is far too serious to rest on such an argument. In fact it is based on different considerations which need to be properly outlined so that we can fully understand the method of deduction and construction on the basis of established statements in the Qur'ān and *Ḥadīth*. We will be able then to appreciate the dynamic nature of Islamic jurisprudence, which is totally different from the stale situation which appears to have remained with scholars upheld over generations of inactivity.

Islamic jurisprudence was not born in a vacuum, nor can it function in one. It was born when an Islamic community came into existence. It thus began to answer the needs of that community to ensure that its life was in line with Islamic principles and values. The Islamic community was not the product of Islamic jurisprudence; in fact it is the other way round: the legal code came into being so that it might fulfil the needs of the Islamic community as it began to live and function. Both facts are of great importance, for they provide us with insight into the dynamic nature of Islamic jurisprudence and its provisions.

If we were to take statements and rulings deduced from them without reference to these two facts, or to the circumstances prevailing at the time of the revelation of the statement or the deduction of the rulings, and without understanding the social environment when they were deduced and the needs they tried to meet, we would betray a lack of understanding of the nature of Islam and its jurisprudence. A dynamic jurisprudence is essentially different from an academic legal theory, although the two may be based on the same original statements. Dynamic jurisprudence takes into consideration the practical situation which prevailed at the time of the revelation of the texts and the time when the rulings were deduced and formulated. It considers the practical situation to be inseparable from the statements and rulings. If we separate the two, we place ourselves in an unbalanced situation.

This means that there is no single ruling which may be viewed in isolation of the social environment and circumstances that prevailed at the time when it was deduced. Let us cite here the example relevant to our discussion, namely, recommending oneself for public office. The rule we have is that this is forbidden, on account of the Qur'ānic statement, "*Do not pretend to purity,*" and the *ḥadīth* which states: "We do not give a position [of government] to anyone who asks for it.

This rule was formulated in an Islamic community so that it could be implemented by that community, because it serves its purposes and fits with its historical requirements and general nature. It is an Islamic rule for an Islamic community. It is not a theoretical rule for an idealistic situation. Hence, it produces its beneficial effects only when it is implemented in a community that is Islamic in origin, make-up and commitment. Any community that does not meet these criteria is merely a vacuum, in as much as this rule is concerned. It is not a fitting environment for its implementation. This applies to all provisions of the Islamic legal code, but we are speaking in detail here only about this particular rule because it is the one related to the text of the *sūrah* we are discussing.

We need now to understand why people in Islamic society must not speak about their own good qualities, and why they must not nominate themselves for positions of government. Why are they not allowed to organize an election campaign so that they can be voted into parliament, or to a leadership position? The answer is that in Islamic society people do not need any of this in order to show their suitability for such positions. Moreover, such positions in society are really a heavy burden which does not tempt anyone to seek them, except for reward from God should one be able to discharge heavy responsibilities properly, for the general interest of the community. This means that positions of government are only sought by people who have some purpose of their own which they wish to accomplish by holding office. Such people must not be given such positions. But this fact cannot be properly understood until we have understood the true nature of the Muslim community and its make-up.

The Birth of a Muslim Community

Movement is the constituent element of Islamic society, and this is what gives birth to it. Initially, the faith comes from its divine source, conveyed by God's Messenger in word and deed. In later generations, it is represented by advocates of the divine faith. Some people will respond to this advocacy, and they are met with resistance, and subjected to persecution by tyrannical regimes implementing different forms of *Jāhiliyyah*. Some may succumb to persecution and turn away from the faith and its advocating movement, while others remain steadfast. Some of the latter may become martyrs, and others continue the struggle until God has judged between them and their opponents. This latter group will be granted victory by God, who makes them a means of fulfilling His will. He fulfils His promise to them of victory and power, so that they can establish the rule of divine faith. The victory is not theirs as a personal gain or reward. It is a victory of their message, so that they establish God's Lordship of mankind.

This group of people do not limit their faith to a certain piece of land, or to a certain race, nation, colour, language or similarly hollow tie. Their mission is to liberate mankind, the world over, from submission to anyone other than God, and to elevate mankind far above the level of subservience to tyrants, regardless of their type of tyranny.

As this movement goes on, people's qualities become apparent, and their respective positions are identified on the basis of standards and values that are firmly rooted in this faith and acceptable to all the community. These are values such as dedication to the cause, sacrifice, piety, a high standard of morals, efficiency and ability. All these values are judged by practice, as they become apparent through action and movement. Thus the community comes to recognize those who have them. Such people do not need to make any pretension to excellence, nor do they need to seek a position of government or be elected to parliament on the basis of their own campaigns.

In such a Muslim community, the social make-up is based on the distinction achieved through movement and action to implement the values of faith. That is what happened in the first Muslim community, when distinction was achieved by the early group of the *Muhājirīn* and the *Anṣār*, by the army in the Battle of Badr, by those who gave the Prophet the pledge to fight till death before the signing of the Treaty of Al-Ḥudaybiyah, and by the ones who fought in different battles for Islam before the victory that regained Makkah for Islam. In subsequent generations, distinction was achieved through dedication to the cause of Islam. In such a community people do not begrudge others their dues, and they do not deny them their positions of honour, even though human weakness may overcome some people who covet personal gains. This means that people do not need to extol their own virtues and seek power for themselves.

Suitability and Responsibility

Some people may suggest that this quality belongs uniquely to the first Muslim community on the basis of its historical circumstances. They forget, however, that a true Islamic society will have no other foundation or method of existence. It will not come about unless a movement advocates a return to Islam and helps people abandon the *jāhiliyyah* into which they have sunk. That is the starting point. It will inevitably be followed by a period of hardship and trial, just like the first time. Some of its members will succumb to pressure, while others will remain steadfast. There will be martyrs among them while those who survive will be determined to continue the struggle. They will hate sinking back into *jāhiliyyah* as much as they hate being thrown into fire. They keep up the struggle until God has judged between them and

their opponents, and gives them victory as He did with the first Muslim community. This means the birth of a new Islamic system in some part of God's land. At this point, the movement will have travelled from the point of beginning to the point of establishing an Islamic society, and in the meantime it will have sorted out its advocates into different grades based on faith and the standards and values they put into effect. These will not need to nominate themselves for positions of power, because their community, which fought the campaign of *jihād* with them, will have recognized their abilities and recommended them.

Some may argue that this only applies in the initial period. That it does not extend to the next period when Islamic society is well established and well settled. This notion betrays a complete lack of awareness of the nature of Islam. This faith of Islam will never stop its movement, because its goal is to liberate all mankind throughout the whole world from submission to tyrannical power. This means that the movement will continue and distinction in the movement will remain the criterion for recognizing those who have talent, ability and dedication. It will not stop unless there is a deviation from Islam. The rule that prohibits self-promotion for positions of government will remain operative within its environment, just as when it was first put into effect.

It may also be said that when the community gets larger, people will not know each other and those who have abilities and talents will need to stand up and speak about themselves, seeking position and authority. Again such an argument is fallacious, influenced by the present-day set up. In a Muslim community, the people of every neighbourhood will know one another well, because that is intrinsic to the Muslim community and its qualities. Hence, every locality will know those of them who have talent and ability, and they evaluate these by Islamic standards. It will not be difficult for them to choose those who are dedicated and hard working for the sake of the community to represent them in local councils or in parliament. As for positions of government, the ruler, who is chosen by the whole community on the recommendation of community leaders or parliament, will fill them with people from among those who have already been identified on the basis of their dedication and ability. As we have said, the movement will continue in Islamic society and *jihād* will continue for the rest of time.

A Maze of Our Own Making

Those who think or write about the Islamic system and its structure today place themselves in a maze, because they try to implement the Islamic system and its rules and values in their present social set-up. Compared with the Islamic system, such a set-up is like a vacuum which provides no room for the implementation of any

Islamic rules. There is a fundamental difference in the very make-up of the two types of society. In the Islamic system, people and groups are distinguished through what they do in the process of establishing the Islamic faith in practice and in the struggle against the values and systems of *jāhiliyyah*. It is their perseverance which enables them to endure pressure, persecution and other hardships that continue until the establishment of an Islamic society in the land. Other societies belong to *jāhiliyyah*, and they are stagnating, upholding principles and values that have nothing to do with Islam. As such, they are like a vacuum that cannot support the functioning of Islamic principles and values.

Those writers and researchers look for a solution which enables them to advocate the Islamic system and its institutions, and to operate its values and laws. The first thing to trouble them is how the members of the Consultative Council are to be selected if they cannot put their names forward or speak about their own qualities. How are the right people to be known in communities such as we have today where people do not know each other's virtues and are not judged by the right standards of honesty, efficiency and integrity? They are also troubled by the method of choosing a head of state. Is he to be chosen by public referendum, or by the Consultative Council? If he is the one who nominates the members of the Consultative Council, how are these to select him in future? Will they not feel indebted to him and wish to return his favour? Besides, if they are the ones to select or elect him, will they not have leverage over him, when he is overall leader? When nominating them, will he not choose only those who are loyal to him? Such questions are endless.

The starting point in this maze is the assumption that our society today is a Muslim one, and that we only need to have the rules and laws ready to implement them, changing nothing of society's set-up, values and moral principles. When we start at this point, we are in a vacuum, and as we move on further into this vacuum, we will soon feel dizzy as if we are moving through an endless maze.

The present society in which we live is not an Islamic one, and it will not be the one in which the Islamic system and its rules and values will be implemented. They are impossible to implement in such a society because, by nature, they neither start nor operate in a vacuum. Islamic society is composed of individuals and groups that strive and struggle in order to bring it about, facing all the pressures to which they may be subjected by the state of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah*, that prevails in other societies. The status and qualities of these individuals come to be recognized during the struggle. Thus the Islamic society is a newborn society that moves along its set course, aiming to liberate mankind, throughout the world from submission to any authority other than God.

Countless other issues are raised along with that of choosing the leader and selecting the Consultative Council. These are all tackled by writers who try to fit Islam to the present society with all its principles, moral values, and various concepts. They preoccupy themselves with questions such as banks and insurance companies and the usurious basis of their work, family planning and similar matters. In all these, they either respond to questions which people put to them, or they try to look at their status in an Islamic society. But they all begin at the point that leads them into the maze, assuming that fundamental Islamic principles will be implemented in the current social structures that have their un-Islamic basis. They think that when this is done, these societies become Islamic. This is both ludicrous and sad at the same time.

It was not Islamic jurisprudence, with all its codes and rules, that gave birth to Islamic society. It was the other way round. Islamic society faced up to *jāhiliyyah* and in the process gave birth to Islamic legal codes which were derived from the basic principles of Islam. The reverse can never take place. Islamic laws are not formulated on paper, but in the practical life of the Muslim community. Hence, it is absolutely essential that a Muslim community first comes into existence to provide the environment where Islamic law takes its roots and begins to be implemented.

In such a situation matters are totally different. There may be a need in such a society for banks, insurance companies, a family planning policy, or there may be no need for one or more of these. We cannot predict in advance what that society may or may not need in order to tailor laws to meet these needs. Moreover, the laws we have neither fit nor satisfy the needs of non-Islamic societies, because Islam does not accept these societies in the first place. It does not concern itself with their needs which arise from their own systems, nor does it trouble itself with finding solutions for them.

It is the divine faith that provides the social basis, and it is the responsibility of human beings to adjust their lives to fit it. Such adjustment can only come about through an active movement that aims to establish the basic principle of God's oneness and His Lordship over mankind, and also to liberate humanity from submission to tyranny. All this comes about through the implementation of God's law in their lives. Inevitably, such a movement will face resistance and persecution. The cycle will also continue with some believers weakening and reverting to *jāhiliyyah*, while others remain steadfast, losing some of their numbers as martyrs while the others persevere until God gives them victory. At this point Islamic society comes into existence, with its advocates having distinguished themselves with its colours and values. Their lives will then have different needs, and the methods to satisfy those needs will also be different from those available in non-Islamic societies. Deduction and construction of rules will begin to meet the needs of that society, and the legal code that is born then is one that lives in a practical environment that has definite needs.

Suppose that an Islamic society comes into existence. It collects *zakāt* and distributes it to its rightful beneficiaries; its people deal' with each other on the basis of mutual compassion and a close, caring relationship within each local community, and within the whole of society. Moreover, people have no room for extravagance and arrogant rivalry in worldly riches, but instead uphold all Islamic values. How are we to tell today whether such a society will ever need insurance companies when it has all these values that ensure common social security? If it needs insurance companies, how are we to know whether the present ones, which operate in un-Islamic society and meet its needs, will fit the insurance needs of such an Islamic

society? Similarly, how are we to tell whether an Islamic society that goes through a continuous struggle for God's cause, i.e. *jihād*, will ever need to put in place a family planning policy? If we cannot predict the needs of our society when it is based on Islam, because of the great gulf between its values, concerns and aims and those of other societies, why should we waste our time and effort in trying to adapt and modify existing rules in order to fit them to the needs of that society when it comes into existence?

As we have explained, the basic flaw is in taking the present set-up as the starting point and thinking that an exercise of simple self adjustment will bring back the divine faith into practical existence. It is time for the advocates of Islam to think well of their faith and to place it far above a position of mere service to non-Islamic societies and their needs. They have to tell people that they must first declare their acceptance of Islam and willingness to submit to its rule, or in other words, declare their submission to God alone. This means that they are willing to implement Islam fully in their lives, removing all tyranny and acknowledging only God's Lordship over the whole universe and in human life. When people, or a community of people, respond positively, an Islamic society begins to take root. It then provides the social environment for a practical Islamic code to be born and to prosper, as it provides for meeting the needs of that society in accordance with divine faith. Unless such a society comes into existence, busying ourselves with deducing rules and laws to implement now is an exercise in self-delusion which plants seeds in the air. No Islamic code will be formulated in a vacuum just as no plant will ever grow from seeds planted in the air.

Between Theory and Practice

Intellectual research in Islamic jurisprudence may be comfortable, because it involves no risks, but it is not part of Islamic advocacy. In fact it is not a part of Islamic strategy. Those who want to steer away from risk will be better off occupying themselves with literature, art or commerce. Academic study of Islamic jurisprudence on the lines described is in my personal view – and God knows best – a waste of effort and reward. The divine faith does not accept a position of subservience to *jāhiliyyah* which rebels against its rule and which, at times, ridicules it by requesting Islamic solutions for its own problems when it refuses to submit to God and the Islamic faith.

The method of birth of Islamic society is the same, and it follows the same stages. A transformation from *jāhiliyyah* to Islam will never be an easy task, and it will never start with codifying Islamic principles in preparedness for Islamic society whenever it may come into existence. Nor are these codes the ingredient that non-Islamic

societies require in order to become Islamic. The difficulty in such a transformation is not due to Islamic laws being inadequate to meet the sophisticated needs of advanced and civilized societies. That is all self-deception. What prevents such societies from becoming Islamic is tyranny that refuses to acknowledge that all sovereignty belongs to God alone. Hence they refuse to acknowledge God's Lordship over human life and over the whole world. Thus they take themselves out of Islam altogether. That is a part of Islam that is essentially known to all. Moreover, when the masses submit to tyranny, they make the tyrants lords beside God, and they obey them. Thus the masses take themselves away from believing in the oneness of God to polytheism, because acknowledging Lordship as belonging to any beings other than God is to place such beings in the same position as God. That is how *jāhiliyyah* is established as a human system. It is founded on misconceptions as much as it is founded on material power.

The codification of Islamic law, then, cannot encounter *jāhiliyyah* with adequate means. What is adequate in encountering it is a movement which calls on society to return to Islam, and which fights *jāhiliyyah* with all its structure. The normal course will then start, and God will eventually judge between the advocates of Islam and their opponents on the basis of complete and pure justice. Only at that point does the role of Islamic law start, when its rules and provisions have a natural environment in which to be implemented. They are then able to meet the needs of the newly born Islamic society, according to the nature, circumstances and extent of these needs. We cannot predict these and what they will be like. To occupy ourselves now with formulating these is not the sort of serious preoccupation that fits with the nature of the Islamic faith.

This does not mean that the laws that the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah* mention are not applicable today. It only means that the society in which they are meant to operate is not yet in existence. Hence, their full application waits until that society becomes a reality. However, they must be implemented by every Muslim individual wherever he or she may be living while they work for the establishment of Islamic society.

To understand the nature of the birth of Islamic society according to the method already explained is the starting point in the real work to re-establish Islam in a real society after it has ceased to exist. It was because of the adoption of man-made laws in preference to God's law over the last two centuries that Islamic society ceased to exist, despite the presence of mosques and minarets, prayers and supplication. All this gives us a false feeling that Islamic society is still alive, when it has rather been uprooted altogether. When Islamic society came into existence the first time, no mosques or worship rituals were available. It was born when people were called upon to believe in God and to worship Him alone, and they responded to that call. Their worship of Him did not take the form of rituals like prayer, because these had

not yet been made obligatory. It was represented in their submission to Him alone. When these people acquired material power on earth, legislation was given to them. When they had to meet the practical needs of their life, they were able to deduce codes and legal provisions, in addition to what the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah* legislate. That is the proper and only way.

I wish there was an easy way to transform people generally at the first call made to them to accept Islam and explain its laws to them. But this is wishful thinking. People do not abandon *jāhiliyyah* or change their submission to tyranny in order to adopt Islam and worship God alone except through the hard and arduous route along which the Islamic message advocates itself. It always starts with an individual, followed by a vanguard group. Then the conflict with non-Islamic society begins, bringing in its wake all sorts of trials and hardships. When the conflict is resolved and God grants victory to the Islamic message and its advocates, Islam is established and people enter into God's faith in groups. That faith involves a complete way of life, which is the only way acceptable to God: *"He who seeks a religion other than self-surrender to God, it will not be accepted from him."* (3: 85)

The above explanation may give us an insight into Joseph's attitude. He was not living in a society that had submitted all its affairs to God's law, thereby prohibiting seeking office or requesting a government position. He felt that the circumstances offered him a chance to be in a position of authority, not a position of subservience in *jāhiliyyah* society. Things turned out as he wished. He was then able to promote his faith in Egypt, while the Chief Minister and the King had their authority substantially curtailed.

High Position and Freedom for Joseph

Having elaborated the point about Joseph's request to be in charge of the Kingdom's store houses, and the issue of seeking government posts in Islamic society, we pick up the thread of the story again. When we consider the text of the *sūrah* we find that it does not mention the King's agreement to Joseph's request. It is as if the request itself implied the King's approval. This is an even higher honour given to Joseph, and it shows his high standing with the King. He only needed to state his request for it to be answered. This is confirmed by the following verses: *"Thus did We establish Joseph in the land, free to do what he willed. We bestow Our mercy on whom We will, and We never fail to give their reward to those who do good. But as for those who believe in God and keep away from evil, the reward of the life to come is much better indeed."* (Verses 56-57)

Thus the proof of Joseph's innocence in the way that it was done, and the King's admiration that he has already won, and the granting of his request, all helped to

establish Joseph in the land, giving him a firm and distinguished position.

"Thus did We establish Joseph in the land, free to do what he willed." (Verse 56) He was free to take up the house he wanted, at the place of his choice, and to occupy the position he wished. That freedom contrasts fully with the well in which he was thrown by his brothers and the prison sentence he had to endure, with all the fears and restrictions of both situations. *"We bestow Our mercy on whom We will."* (Verse 56) We replace hardship with ease, fear with security, fetters with freedom, and humiliation with a high position of honour. *"We never fail to give their reward to those who do good."* (Verse 56) Those who demonstrate a strong, unshakeable faith and reliance on God and who deal with other people in fairness and kindness will not fail to have their reward in this life.

"But as for those who believe in God and keep away from evil, the reward of the life to come is much better indeed." (Verse 57) This is not reduced by the fact that such people receive their reward in this life. Yet it is infinitely better than this present reward. Its conditions are that a person should believe and do righteous deeds, steering away from what God has forbidden whether in public or private. Thus has God replaced Joseph's trials with his new position of power, and also with the promise of better things to come in the life to come. All this reward is for faith, righteousness and perseverance in the face of difficulty.

4

Brothers' Reunion

Joseph's brothers arrived and presented themselves before him. He immediately knew them, but they did not recognize him. (58)

And when he had given them their provisions, he said: 'Bring me that brother of yours from your father's side. Do you not see that I give just measure and that I am the best of hosts? (59)

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.' (60)

They said: 'We shall endeavour to persuade his father to let him come. We will make sure to do so.' (61)

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.' (62)

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.' (63)

وَجَاءَ إِخْوَةُ يُوسُفَ فَدَخَلُوا عَلَيْهِ
فَعَرَفُوهُمْ وَهُمْ لَهُ مُنْكَرُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾

وَلَمَّا جَهَّزَهُم بِجَهَّازِهِمْ قَالَ أَتُّونِي بِأَخٍ
لَكُمْ مِّنْ أَبِيكُمْ ۚ أَلَا تَرَوْنَ أَنِّي أُوْفِي
الْكَيْلَ وَأَنَا خَيْرُ الْمُنْزِلِينَ ﴿٥٩﴾

فَإِن لَّمْ تَأْتُونِي بِهِ ۖ فَلَا كَيْلَ لَكُمْ عِنْدِي
وَلَا تَقْرَبُونِ ﴿٦٠﴾

قَالُوا سَتَرُوْا عَنْهُ آبَاهُ وَإِنَّا لَفَاعِلُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

وَقَالَ لِفِتْيَانِهِ اجْعَلُوا بِضَعَتَهُمْ فِي رِحَالِهِمْ
لَعَلَّهُمْ يَعْرِفُونَهَا إِذَا انْقَلَبُوا إِلَىٰ أَهْلِهِمْ
لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

فَلَمَّا رَجَعُوا إِلَىٰ أَبِيهِمْ قَالُوا يَا أَبَانَا مُنِعَ
مِنَّا الْكَيْلُ فَأَرْسِلْ مَعَنَا أَخَانَا نَكْتَلْ
وَإِنَّا لَهُ لَحَفِظُونَ ﴿٦٣﴾

He replied: 'Am I to trust you with him in the same way as I trusted you with his brother in the past? But God is the best of guardians; and of all those who show mercy He is the Most Merciful.' (64)

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. We will buy provisions for our people, and we will take good care of our brother. We will receive an extra camel-load: that should be an easy load.' (65)

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.' When they had given him their solemn pledge, [Jacob] said: 'God is witness to all that we say.' (66)

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.' (67)

قَالَ هَلْ ءَامَنْتُمْ عَلَيْهِ إِلَّا كَمَا
أَمِنْتُمْ عَلَىٰ أَخِيهِ مِنْ قَبْلُ ۗ فَاللَّهُ خَيْرٌ
حَافِظًا ۗ وَهُوَ أَرْحَمُ الرَّاحِمِينَ ﴿٦٤﴾

وَلَمَّا فَتَحُوا مَتَاعَهُمْ وَجَدُوا بِضْعَتَهُمْ
رُدَّتْ إِلَيْهِمْ ۗ قَالُوا يَتَّبِعُنَا مَا نَبِغِي هَذِهِ
بِضْعَتُنَا رُدَّتْ إِلَيْنَا ۗ وَنَمِيرُ أَهْلَنَا وَنَحْفَظُ
أَخَانَا وَنَزِدَادُ كَيْلٍ بَعِيرٍ ۗ ذَٰلِكَ كَيْلٌ
يَسِيرٌ ﴿٦٥﴾

قَالَ لَنْ أَرْسِلَهُ مَعَكُمْ حَتَّىٰ تُتُونَ
مَوْثِقًا مِّنَ اللَّهِ لَتَأْتِنِي بِهِ إِلَّا أَنْ
يُحَاطَ بِكُمْ ۗ فَلَمَّا ءَاتَوْهُ مَوْثِقَهُمْ قَالَ اللَّهُ
عَلَىٰ مَا نَقُولُ وَكِيلٌ ﴿٦٦﴾

وَقَالَ يَبْنَئِي لَأَدْخُلُوا مِن بَابٍ وَاحِدٍ
وَأَدْخُلُوا مِن أَبْوَابٍ مُّتَفَرِّقَةٍ ۗ وَمَا أُغْنِي
عَنكُمْ مِّنَ اللَّهِ مِن شَيْءٍ ۗ إِنْ أَلْحَمْتُمْ إِلَّا
لِلَّهِ عَلَيْهِ تَوَكَّلْتُ ۗ وَعَلَيْهِ فَلْيَتَوَكَّلِ
الْمُتَوَكِّلُونَ ﴿٦٧﴾

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. (68)

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.' (69)

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.' (70)

Turning back towards them, they said: 'What is it that you have lost?' (71)

'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.' (72)

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.' (73)

وَلَمَّا دَخَلُوا مِنْ حَيْثُ أَمَرَهُمْ أَبُوهُمْ مَا
كَانَ يُغْنِي عَنْهُمْ مِنَ اللَّهِ مِنْ شَيْءٍ
إِلَّا حَاجَةً فِي نَفْسِ يَعْقُوبَ قَضَاهَا
وَإِنَّهُ لَذُو عِلْمٍ لِمَا عَلَّمْنَاهُ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ
النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٦٨﴾

وَلَمَّا دَخَلُوا عَلَىٰ يُوسُفَ ءَاوَىٰ إِلَيْهِ
أَخَاهُ ۖ قَالَ إِنِّي أَنَا أَخُوكَ فَلَا تَبْتَئِسْ بِمَا
كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٦٩﴾

فَلَمَّا جَهَّزَهُم بِجَهَّازِهِمْ جَعَلَ السِّقَايَةَ فِي
رَحْلِ أَخِيهِ ثُمَّ أَذَّنَ مُؤَذِّنٌ أَتَتْهَا آلُ عِيرٍ
إِنَّكُمْ لَسَرِقُونَ ﴿٧٠﴾

قَالُوا وَاَقْبَلُوا عَلَيْهِمْ مَاذَا تَفْقَدُونَ
﴿٧١﴾

قَالُوا نَفَقْدُ صُوعَ الْمَلِكِ وَلَمَن جَاءَ
بِهِ حَمْلٌ بِعِيرٍ وَأَنَا بِهِ زَعِيمٌ ﴿٧٢﴾

قَالُوا تَاللَّهِ لَقَدْ عَلِمْتُمْ مَا جِئْنَا لِنُفْسِدَ

[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 يَسْرِقْ فَقَدْ سَرَقَ أَخٌ لَهُ مِنْ

قَبْلُ ۚ فَأَسْرَهَا يُوسُفُ فِي نَفْسِهِ ۚ وَلَمْ

يُبْدِهَا لَهُمْ ۚ قَالَ أَنْتُمْ شَرُّ مَكَانًا 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
مَتَّعْنَا عَلَيْهِ إِذَا إِذَا لَطَلِمُونَ ﴿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

messengers did, and it is what the advocates of the divine faith should do in all communities and at all times when they confront a state of *jāhiliyyah*.

Unsuccessful Appeal

Turning back to Joseph's brothers whose grudge against Joseph and his brother has been aroused, we find them trying their best to deny having anything to do with theft, while they attach it to the other branch of their father's children: *"They said: 'If he has stolen – well, a brother of his had stolen previously.'"* (Verse 77) There are countless reports which try to endorse their statement, quoting various excuses and legends, forgetting that these people had themselves previously lied to their father about Joseph. These attempts forget that they could lie again to Egypt's Chief Minister in order to deny their responsibility for an embarrassing act. They thus try to absolve themselves of anything to do with Joseph and his younger brother. Their action shows that they still harboured a grudge against both Joseph and his brother. Hence they put the blame squarely on these two.

"Joseph kept his secret to himself revealed nothing to them." (Verse 77) He simply bore their accusation without showing that he was affected by it, knowing that both he and his brother were totally innocent. He only said to them: *"You are in a far worse position."* (Verse 77) What this means is that their false accusation put them in a far worse position in God's sight than that of the accused. His is a statement of fact, not an insult. *"God knows best what you are speaking of"* (Verse 77) This he says so as not to enter into any argument about their accusation, which he presumably had nothing to do with.

They, however, now start to feel the embarrassing situation they are in. They remembered the solemn pledge they gave to their father when he made it a condition of his consent to send their brother with them that they would *"indeed bring him back to me"*, unless the worst befell them. Hence they appeal to Joseph to let their younger brother return with them, pleading the suffering that his detention would cause to his old father. They offer one of themselves in his place, if he would not free him for the sake of his aged father. They further appeal to his kindness and compassion, saying to him: *"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."* (Verse 78)

Joseph, however, wanted to teach them a lesson, and he wanted to arouse their interest in the surprise he was preparing for them, and for his father and all who knew him, so that its effect would be appreciated by all. Hence he rejects their offer out of hand: *"God forbid that we should take any other than the man with whom we found our property; for then we would be wrongdoers."* (Verse 79) He does not say that he would not take an innocent person in place of a thief, because he knew that his

brother was no thief. He expresses the situation very precisely and accurately: *“God forbid that we should take any other than the man with whom we found our property.”* That is the whole situation without any addition to make the accusation appear true or false. He further comments, *“for then we would be wrongdoers.”* We have no wish to do anyone any wrong. That concludes the whole episode, and Joseph’s brothers knew then that their appeals would not bring any desired result. They retreated to reflect on the situation they now faced.

5

A Child's Dream Comes
True

When they despaired of [moving] him, they withdrew to begin earnest consultations among themselves. The eldest of them said: 'Do you not recall that your father took from you a pledge in God's name, and that previously you were at fault with respect to Joseph? I shall not depart from this land until my father gives me leave or God judges for me. He is certainly the best of judges.' (80)

Go back to your father and say: 'Father, your son has stolen. We testify only to that which we know. We cannot guard against the unforeseen.' (81)

You may ask the [people of the] town where we were, and the caravan with which we travelled. We are certainly telling the truth.' (82)

He said: 'No, but your minds have tempted you to evil. Sweet patience! God may well bring them all back to me. He is All-Knowing, Wise.' (83)

فَلَمَّا اسْتَيْسَسُوا مِنْهُ خَلَصُوا نَجِيًّا ۗ قَالَ
كَبِيرُهُمْ أَلَمْ تَعْلَمُوا أَنَّ أَبَاكُمْ قَدْ
أَخَذَ عَلَيْكُمْ مَوْتَقًا مِّنَ اللَّهِ وَمِن قَبْلُ مَا
فَرَطْتُمْ فِي يُوسُفَ ۗ فَلَن أَبْرَحَ الْأَرْضَ
حَتَّى يَأْذَنَ لِي أَبِي أَوْ يَحْكُمَ اللَّهُ لِي ۗ وَهُوَ
خَيْرُ الْحَاكِمِينَ ﴿٨٠﴾

أَرْجِعُوا إِلَىٰ آبَائِكُمْ فَقُولُوا يَتَابَعْنَا إِن
أَبْنَاكَ سَرَقَ وَمَا شَهِدْنَا إِلَّا بِمَا عَلَّمَنَا وَمَا
كُنَّا لِلْغَيْبِ حَافِظِينَ ﴿٨١﴾

وَسَأَلِ الْقَرْيَةَ الَّتِي كُنَّا فِيهَا وَالْعِيرَ الَّتِي
أَقْبَلْنَا فِيهَا ۗ وَإِنَّا لَصَادِقُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾

قَالَ بَلْ سَوَّلَتْ لَكُمْ أَنْفُسُكُمْ أَمْرًا ۗ فَصَبْرٌ
جَمِيلٌ ۗ عَسَىٰ اللَّهُ أَنْ يَأْتِيَنِي بِهِمْ جَمِيعًا ۗ
إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْعَلِيمُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿٨٣﴾

He then turned away from them and said: 'Oh, woe is me for Joseph!' His eyes became white with grief, and he was burdened with silent sorrow. (84)

وَتَوَلَّىٰ عَنْهُمْ وَقَالَ يَا أَسْفَىٰ عَلَىٰ يُوسُفَ
وَأَبْيَضَّتْ عَيْنَاهُ مِنَ الْحُزَنِ فَهُوَ كَظِيمٌ

٨٤

They said: 'By God, you will continue to remember Joseph until you wither away or until you are dead.' (85)

قَالُوا تَاللَّهِ تَفْتَأُ تَذْكُرُ يُوسُفَ حَتَّىٰ
تَكُونَ حَرَضًا أَوْ تَكُونَ مِنَ
الْهَالِكِينَ

٨٥

He said: 'It is only to God that I complain and express my grief. For I know of God what you do not know. (86)

قَالَ إِنَّمَا أَشْكُوا بَثِّي وَحُزْنِي إِلَى اللَّهِ
وَأَعْلَمُ مِنَ اللَّهِ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

٨٦

My sons, go and seek news of Joseph and his brother; and do not despair of God's mercy; for none but unbelievers can ever despair of God's mercy.' (87)

يَبَنِيَّ أَذْهَبُوا فَتَحَسَّسُوا مِنْ يُوسُفَ
وَأَخِيهِ وَلَا تَيْسَّرُوا مِنْ رَّوْحِ اللَّهِ إِنَّهُ لَا
يَأْيَسُ مِنْ رَّوْحِ اللَّهِ إِلَّا الْقَوْمُ الْكَافِرُونَ

٨٧

When they presented themselves before [Joseph] again, they said: 'Exalted one! Hardship has befallen us and our people, and so we have brought but little merchandise. Give us our full measure [of grains], and be charitable to us. Indeed God rewards those who are charitable.' (88)

فَلَمَّا دَخَلُوا عَلَيْهِ قَالُوا يَا أَيُّهَا الْعَزِيزُ مَسَّنَا
وَأَهْلَنَا الضُّرُّ وَجِئْنَا بِبِضْعَةٍ مُزْجَلَةٍ
فَأَوْفِ لَنَا الْكَيْلَ وَتَصَدَّقْ عَلَيْنَا إِنَّ اللَّهَ
تَجْزِي الْمُتَصَدِّقِينَ

٨٨

He said: 'Do you know what you did to Joseph and his brother, when you were still unaware?' (89)

They said: 'Why — is it indeed you who are Joseph?' He replied: 'I am Joseph, and this is my brother. God has indeed been gracious to us. If one remains God-fearing and patient in adversity, God will not fail to reward those who do good.' (90)

They said: 'By God! Most certainly has God raised you high above us, and we were indeed sinners.' (91)

He replied: 'None shall reproach you today. May God forgive you. He is indeed the Most Merciful of those who show mercy.' (92)

Now go and take this shirt of mine and lay it over my father's face, and he will recover his sight. Then come back to me with all your family.' (93)

As the caravan set out, their father said [to the people around him]: 'I feel the breath of Joseph, though you will not believe me.' (94)

قَالَ هَلْ عَلِمْتُمْ مَا فَعَلْتُمْ بِيُوسُفَ وَأَخِيهِ
إِذْ أَنْتُمْ جَاهِلُونَ ﴿٨٩﴾

قَالُوا أَيْنَكَ لَأَنْتَ يُوسُفُ ۗ قَالَ أَنَا
يُوسُفُ وَهَذَا أَخِي ۗ قَدْ مَنَّ اللَّهُ عَلَيْنَا ۗ
إِنَّهُ مَنْ يَتَّقِ وَيَصْبِرْ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُضِيعُ
أَجْرَ الْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿٩٠﴾

قَالُوا تَاللَّهِ لَقَدْ ءَاثَرَكَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْنَا وَإِنْ
كُنَّا لَخَطِئِينَ ﴿٩١﴾

قَالَ لَا تَثْرِبَ عَلَيْكُمْ أَيُّومَ ۗ يَغْفِرُ اللَّهُ
لَكُمْ ۗ وَهُوَ أَرْحَمُ الرَّاحِمِينَ ﴿٩٢﴾

أَذْهَبُوا بِقَمِيصِي هَذَا فَأَلْقُوهُ عَلَىٰ وَجْهِ
أَبِي يَأْتِ بِصِيرًا ۖ وَأْتُونِي بِأَهْلِكُمْ
أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿٩٣﴾

وَلَمَّا فَصَلَتِ الْعِيرُ قَالَ أَبُوهُمْ إِنِّي
لَأَجِدُ رِيحَ يُوسُفَ ۗ لَوْلَا أَنْ تُفَنِّدُونِ

They replied: 'By God! You are still lost in your old illusions.' (95)



But when the bearer of good news arrived [with Joseph's shirt], he laid it over his face; and he regained his sight. He said: Did I not say to you that I know from God something that you do not know?' (96)



[His sons] said: 'Father, pray to God to forgive us our sins, for we were sinners indeed.' (97)

He said: 'I shall pray to God to forgive you. He is certainly Most Forgiving, Most Merciful.' (98)

When they all presented themselves before Joseph, he drew his parents to himself, saying: 'Enter Egypt in peace, if it so pleases God.' (99)

And he raised his parents to the highest place of honour, and they fell down on their knees, prostrating themselves before him. He said: 'Father, this is the real meaning of my dream of long ago. My Lord has

قَالُوا تَاللّٰهِ إِنَّكَ لَفِي ضَلٰلِكَ الْقَدِيْمِ

فَلَمَّا اَنْ جَاءَ الْبَشِيْرُ اَلْقَنَهُ عَلٰى وَّجْهِهِ

فَارْتَدَّ بَصِيْرًا ۗ قَالَ اَلَمْ اَقُلْ لَّكُمْ اِنِّيْ

اَعْلَمُ مِنَ اللّٰهِ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُوْنَ ﴿٩٦﴾

قَالُوا يَا اَبَانَا اَسْتَغْفِرُ لَنَا ذُنُوْبَنَا اِنَّا كُنَّا

خٰطِئِيْنَ ﴿٩٧﴾

قَالَ سَوْفَ اَسْتَغْفِرُ لَكُمْ رَبِّيْ ۗ اِنَّهُ هُوَ

الْغَفُوْرُ الرَّحِيْمُ ﴿٩٨﴾

فَلَمَّا دَخَلُوْا عَلٰى يُوْسُفَ ءَاوٰى اِلَيْهِ اَبُوَيْهِ

وَقَالَ اَدْخُلُوْا مِصْرَ اِنْ شَاءَ اللّٰهُ ءَاْمِنِيْنَ



وَرَفَعَ اَبُوَيْهِ عَلٰى الْعَرْشِ وَخَرُّوْا لَهُ

سُجَّدًا ۗ وَقَالَ يَا بَتِ هٰذَا تَاْوِيْلُ رُءْيَايَ

made it come true.

He has been gracious to me, releasing me from prison, and bringing you all from the desert after Satan had sown discord between me and my brothers. My Lord is gracious in whatever way He wishes. He is All-Knowing, truly Wise.' (100)

My Lord, You have given me power and imparted to me some understanding of the real meaning of statements. Originator of the heavens and the earth! You are my guardian in this world and in the life to come. Let me die as one who has surrendered himself to You, and admit me among the righteous.' (101)

مِن قَبْلُ قَدْ جَعَلَهَا رَبِّي حَقًّا ط

وَقَدْ أَحْسَنَ بِي إِذْ أَخْرَجَنِي مِنَ السِّجْنِ
وَجَاءَ بِكُمْ مِنَ الْبَدْوِ مِنْ بَعْدِ أَنْ نَزَغَ
الشَّيْطَانُ بَيْنِي وَبَيْنَ إِخْوَتِي ۚ إِنَّ رَبِّي
لَطِيفٌ لِّمَا يَشَاءُ ۚ إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْعَلِيمُ الْحَكِيمُ



رَبِّ قَدْ آتَيْتَنِي مِنَ الْمَلِكِ وَعَلَّمْتَنِي
مِن تَأْوِيلِ الْأَحَادِيثِ ۚ فَاطِرَ السَّمَوَاتِ
وَالْأَرْضِ أَنْتَ وَلِيِّـَ فِي الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ ط
تَوَفَّنِي مُسْلِمًا وَأَلْحِقْنِي بِالصَّالِحِينَ ﴿١٠١﴾

The Crisis Reaches Its Climax

When Joseph's brothers realized that all their attempts to rescue their young brother were in vain, they left Joseph and went away. They sat in council, deeply involved in earnest consultations. We see them exchanging views in a very serious manner. The *sūrah* does not mention all that they said. It only records the last statement which formed the basis of their next steps: "When they despaired of [moving] him, they withdrew to begin earnest consultations among themselves. The eldest of them said: Do you not recall that your father took from you a pledge in God's name, and that previously you were at fault with respect to Joseph? I shall not depart from this land until my father gives me leave or God judges for me. He is certainly the best of judges.' Go back to your father and say: 'Father, your son has stolen. We testify only to that which we know. We cannot guard against the unforeseen. You may ask the [people of the] town where we were, and the caravan with which we travelled. We are certainly telling the truth.'" (Verses 80-82)

The eldest reminds them of the pledge they had given and of their carelessness

about Joseph and his welfare. He combines the two events as the basis for his own decision which is not to leave Egypt or meet his father until the latter has given him permission to do so, or God has made a judgement to which he would certainly submit.

He asks that the rest go back to their father and tell him in all frankness that his son had stolen something, and was subsequently detained on account of this. That was all that they knew. If their brother was innocent, and if there was something different about the whole situation, it was certainly hidden from them, and they could not be answerable for what God, in His wisdom, chose to conceal from them. They had not expected anything like this to happen. It could never have been foreseen. If their father doubted what they said, and did not believe them, he could ask the people of the capital city of Egypt where they had been, and the people in their caravan. They were not alone on this business. Indeed there were many caravans travelling to and from Egypt, buying its grain in those years of poor harvest.

The *sūrah* leaves out everything about their actual trip. It places them face to face with their grieved father as they tell him their distressing news. We are in fact told only his short reply which expresses his great pain and distress. Yet he does not give in to despair. He still has hope that God will return his two sons, or indeed his three sons, including his eldest who vowed not to leave Egypt until God had judged for him. It is indeed remarkable that hope should continue to fill his distressed heart: *"He said: 'No, but your minds have tempted you to evil. Sweet patience! God may well bring them all back to me. He is All-Knowing, Wise.'* He then turned away from them and said: *'Oh, woe is me for Joseph!' His eyes became white with grief and he was burdened with silent sorrow."* (Verses 83-84)

"No, but your minds have tempted you to evil. Sweet patience!" (Verse 83) These were his very words when he lost Joseph. However, this time he adds an expression of high hope that God will return Joseph and his brother to him, as well as his other son: *"God may well bring them all back to me. He is All-Knowing, Wise."* (Verse 83) He certainly knows the state Jacob was in, and knows what lies beyond events and tests. He lets everything take place at the appropriate time, when His purpose is fulfilled according to His wisdom.

Where did this ray of hope come from filling the old man's heart? It is nothing more than placing all hope in God and trusting completely to His wisdom, feeling His existence and His endless compassion. It is a feeling that fills the hearts of the elite of believers and becomes more true and profound than the reality they see, hear and touch. *"He then turned away from them and said: 'Oh, woe is me for Joseph!' His eyes became white with grief and he was burdened with silent sorrow."* (Verse 84)

This is an inspirational portrayal of a bereaved father. He feels that his tragedy is all his own. No one around him shares in his distress or feels his pain. Hence, he moves away to nurture the loss of his beloved son, Joseph, whom he has not forgotten despite the passage of so many years. Indeed time has not reduced his sorrow; it has all been brought back to life by the new calamity involving his youngest son, Joseph's younger brother. This is a moment when his sorrow is shown to be stronger than his patient resignation: *"Oh, woe is me for Joseph!"* (Verse 84)

But he soon suppresses his sorrow and hides his feelings. As his intense grief and sadness are suppressed, his eyes lose their sight: *"His eyes became white with grief and he was burdened with silent sorrow."* (Verse 84)

But his sons continue to harbour their grudge, hurt that he still misses Joseph and suffers distress on his account. They do not show him any compassion. Indeed they do not even try to encourage his hopes. Instead they want to extinguish his last ray of hope. They say to him: *"By God, you will continue to remember Joseph until you wither away or until you are dead."* (Verse 85)

This is indeed a cruel thing to say. They are reproaching him for remembering Joseph and feeling sadness at his loss. They tell him that if he continues in such a state, his sorrow will soon deprive him of all his strength or he will die in despair. Joseph is certain not to return.

Their father tells them to leave him alone, because he is only pinning his hopes in his Lord. He makes no complaint to anyone. His relationship with his Lord is different from theirs, and he knows of Him what they do not know: *"It is only to God that I complain and express my grief. For I know of God what you do not know."* (Verse 86) These words describe in a most vivid way the true feelings of a firm believer concerning the truth of the Godhead. That truth itself is also brought up here in sharp relief.

Meeting a Lost Brother

Whilst everyone else despairs at Joseph's return, this has no effect on this pious old man who knows the truth about his Lord, which is a knowledge that is not readily apparent to others. Such knowledge is based on real feeling and an experience of God's ability, kindness, grace and the mercy He bestows on pious servants. His statement, *'I know of God what you do not know,'* expresses this fact as we cannot. It embodies a truth which is only appreciated by those who have had a similar experience. Such people do not succumb to hardship or despair in the face of adversity. In fact adversity only enhances their faith and trust in God's power and mercy. We will not say more than that. We praise God for the grace He has bestowed on us. He knows and sees what is between Him and us.

Jacob then instructs his sons to go back and seek information about their two younger brothers: *“My sons, go and seek news of Joseph and his brother; and do not despair of God's mercy; for none but unbelievers can ever despair of God's mercy.”* (Verse 87) That is the attitude of a person whose heart is keenly aware of the truth of Godhead. *“My sons, go and seek news of Joseph and his brother.”* The Arabic expression for ‘seek news’, *taḥassasū*, adds connotations of gentleness and patient pursuit, so that they can demonstrate something of their own souls in their efforts to find out what happened to their brothers. They must never despair of God for He may yet turn to them in mercy and kindness. Even the Arabic word *rawḥ*, used here to denote ‘mercy’, adds connotations of a spirit experiencing release from hardship.

“None but unbelievers can ever despair of God's mercy.” (Verse 87) Believers, on the other hand, are always in touch with God, enjoying His grace, unshaken by distress or hardship, even though the circumstances may be exceedingly tough. Indeed a believer finds in his faith and bond with his Lord a blessing that gives him reassurance, even in the most difficult moments and under enormous pressure.

For the third time Joseph's brothers go to Egypt. However, their state this time is different. The famine had affected them badly, their money had been spent, and the merchandise they carried with them to barter for food was of a low quality. Hence, they spoke in a tone that invited sympathy, which was not known in their earlier conversations. Their complaint tells of what the famine had done to them: *“When they presented themselves before [Joseph] again, they said: ‘Exalted one! Hardship has befallen us and our people, and so we have brought but little merchandise. Give us our full measure [of grains], and be charitable to us. Indeed God rewards those who are charitable.’”* (Verse 88)

At this point, and with such a passionate appeal that tells of their misfortune, Joseph is no longer able to carry on presenting himself only as the Chief Minister of Egypt, hiding his true relationship to them. The lessons he wished that they should learn have become well known to them. It is now time for the great surprise that they could never have expected. Hence he puts it to them in a careful, easy way, reminding them of the past which they alone had full knowledge of. None was aware of it besides them, except God. He says to them gently: *“Do you know what you did to Joseph and his brother, when you were still unaware?”* (Verse 89)

It was a voice that they might have recalled, with features they might have remembered. Perhaps they did not pay attention because they were talking to the Chief Minister in his place of government. A thought presented itself to them suddenly: *“They said: ‘Why – is it indeed you who are Joseph?’”* (Verse 90) Could it be true? Their minds, hearts, eyes and ears could now see traces of little Joseph in the man talking to them. He replied: *“I am Joseph, and this is my brother. God has indeed been gracious to us. If one remains God-fearing and patient in adversity, God will not fail to reward those who do good.”* (Verse 90)

It was a great surprise indeed. Joseph announces it, reminding them in general terms of what they did to him and his brother out of impulsive ignorance. He stops at that, adding only an acknowledgement of God's grace to him and his brother, making it clear that it was all the result of fearing God, being patient in adversity, and divine justice. In their turn, they remember vividly what they did to Joseph. They are deeply ashamed of their deeds, particularly as they stand before him acknowledging his kindness after their cruelty, his compassion after the harm they caused him. Hence they acknowledge the disparity between their two attitudes, saying: *"By God! Most certainly has God raised you high above us, and we were indeed sinners."* (Verse 91)

A Long Awaited Piece of Good News

They also acknowledged what they realized to be aspects of God's grace bestowed on Joseph, giving him high position, and qualities of forbearance, piety and benevolence. Joseph replied to their acknowledgement of guilt with charitable forgiveness that ended the need for them to feel ashamed of themselves. This shows that Joseph came through his trial with affluence and power as successfully as he came through the earlier trials with hardship and imprisonment.

Joseph is very charitable to his brothers. He replies to their statement by waiving all reproach: *"None shall reproach you today. May God forgive you. He is indeed the Most Merciful of those who show mercy."* (Verse 52) He thus shows that the events of the past have left no lingering bitterness in him. He prays to God to forgive his brothers and turns the conversation to matters that need attention, such as his father whose sorrow was unabated, and whose eyes had become white with grief. Joseph wants to speed up the process of giving him the good news and to meet him as soon as possible. Most urgent of all, he wanted to remove his distress and to help him regain his strength and his eyesight. Hence he tells his brothers: *"Now go and take this shirt of mine and lay it over my father's face, and he will recover his sight. Then come back to me with all your family."* (Verse 93)

How did Joseph know that his father would regain his eyesight once he received his lost son's scent? That is part of what God had taught him. Sudden surprise may produce miraculous effects. Besides, why should there not be a miracle when both Joseph and Jacob are prophets whom God had chosen to be His messengers?

From now on, the narrative takes us from one surprise to another, until it concludes with the realization of the young Joseph's dream which he related to his father at the opening of the *sūrah*.

"As the caravan set out, their father said [to the people around him]: I feel the breath of Joseph, though you will not believe me." (Verse 94) Smelling Joseph's breath! Anything is

easier to believe than this. No one could even think Joseph was alive after all those long years, and that his smell would be recognized by someone weakened by old age. Hence he qualifies his statement by saying that they will think he has gone crazy. If they had only credited him with what was his due, they would have believed that he really felt the smell of his long departed son.

How could Jacob smell Joseph's breath as soon as the caravan departed? And from which place of departure? Some commentators on the Qur'ān say that he sensed the scent from Joseph's shirt right from the point of the caravan's departure from Egypt. But there is no evidence to support this. It is reasonable to say that the Qur'ānic statement refers to the caravan's crossing a certain point in the land of Kanaan, heading towards Jacob's quarters. We do not say this to deny that a miracle could happen to a prophet like Jacob involving a prophet like Joseph. All that we propose is to limit ourselves to the exact meaning of the text, unless it is further explained by an authentic *ḥadīth*. We do not have such a report in this case, and the Qur'ānic statement itself does not support what the commentators say.

Those who were with Jacob did not have the same position with their Lord, and they could not smell Joseph's shirt. Hence they say to him: *"By God! You are still lost in your old illusions."* (Verse 95) They describe all Jacob's feelings about Joseph's return as mere illusions. To them Joseph had gone the way of no return.

But the great surprise is realized, followed by another surprise: *"But when the bearer of good news arrived [with Joseph's shirt], he laid it over his face; and he regained his sight."* (Verse 96) The first surprise relates to the shirt, which is evidence of Joseph's existence and that Jacob would soon meet him. The other surprise is that of Jacob recovering his eyesight after he lost it as a result of his enduring grief. At this point Jacob refers to the fact that he has true knowledge imparted to him by God. He mentioned this to them earlier, but they could not understand him. *"He said: 'Did I not say to you that I know from God something that you do not know?'"* (Verse 96)

Jacob's sons said: *"Father, pray to God to forgive us our sins, for we were sinners indeed."* (Verse 97) We notice here that Jacob still held something in his heart against his sons. He had not yet fully forgiven them. Yet he promises to pray to God to forgive them after he had a chance to recover. His reply suggests that. *"He said: 'I shall pray to God to forgive you. He is certainly Most Forgiving, Most Merciful.'"* (Verse 98) That he promises to pray for their forgiveness at a future point in time comes from a heart that has been hurt.

A Happy Family Reunion

The *sūrah* gives us yet another surprise. Leaving out all details about this last trip, it moves directly to a highly charged final scene. We pick up our commentary with

the family approaching its appointed meeting with Joseph its long departed son. *"When they all presented themselves before Joseph, he drew his parents to himself saying: 'Enter Egypt in peace, if it so pleases God.' And he raised his parents to the highest place of honour, and they fell down on their knees, prostrating themselves before him. He said: 'Father, this is the real meaning of my dream of long ago. My Lord has made it come true. He has been gracious to me, releasing me from prison, and bringing you all from the desert after Satan had sown discord between me and my brothers. My Lord is gracious in whatever way He wishes. He is All-Knowing, truly Wise."* (Verses 99-100)

It is certainly a most powerful scene. Long years have passed with all that they carried of despair and lost hope, pain and distress, longing and grief, and also an urgent, silent plea for reunion. Long hard years of a test that is not easy to pass. After all that we have this powerful scene, with its intensity of feeling, pleasure, happiness and emotion. It is a final scene that is closely connected to the opening one in the story. The opening scene is long gone, but the final one is now taking place. Between the two, Joseph remembers God, never allowing himself to forget Him: *"When they all presented themselves before Joseph, he drew his parents to himself saying: 'Enter Egypt in peace, if it so pleases God.'"* (Verse 99)

He also remembers his earlier dream, realizing that it is now fulfilled as he raises his parents to sit on the couch where he normally sits while his brothers prostrate themselves before him. In his dream he had seen eleven stars as well as the sun and the moon prostrating themselves before him. Hence he sees its fulfilment in the scene that now took place before him: *"And he raised his parents to the highest place of honour, and they fell down on their knees, prostrating themselves before him. He said: 'Father, this is the real meaning of my dream of long ago. My Lord has made it come true."* (Verse 100)

He then speaks of the grace God has bestowed on him: *"He has been gracious to me, releasing me from prison, and bringing you all from the desert after Satan had sown discord between me and my brothers."* (Verse 100) He moves on to emphasize that God accomplishes His will as He pleases: *"My Lord is gracious in whatever way He wishes."* (Verse 100) He achieves His purpose with grace, while people are totally unaware of how His designs are accomplished. Joseph follows this by making the same statement his father did when he told him about his dream at the beginning of the *sūrah*: *"He is All-Knowing, truly Wise."* (Verse 100) This brings harmony between the beginning and the end, even in the way thoughts are expressed.

Before the curtains are drawn over this last emotional scene, we find Joseph pulling himself away from the overwhelming pleasure of family reunion, and also from the pleasant security of high position and real authority to glorify his Lord and express his gratitude to Him. All that he prays for at this moment is that he should die as a person who surrenders himself to God and to be grouped with the righteous: *"My Lord, You have given me power and imparted to me some understanding of the real*

meaning of statements. Originator of the heavens and the earth! You are my guardian in this world and in the life to come. Let me die as one who has surrendered himself to You, and admit me among the righteous.” (Verse 101)

“My Lord, You have given me power.” (Verse 101) You have given me all that comes with a position of power: real authority, high standing, great respect and wealth. All these are blessings given in this world. And You have “imparted to me some understanding of the real meaning of statements.” (Verse 101) This gives me a real understanding of where events lead and how statements and dreams are interpreted. This is a blessing of knowledge. I remember the grace You have bestowed on me and the blessings You have granted me. “Originator of the heavens and the earth!” (Verse 101) You have created them all by Your design and will. You remain in full control of them all, and of all creatures that take their abode in them. “You are my guardian in this world and in the life to come.” (Verse 101) It is You alone who gives real support.

My Lord, all that is Your blessing, and everything testifies to Your power. My Lord, I am not appealing to You to give me power, health or wealth. My appeal is for something that is much more valuable, and much longer lasting: *“Let me die as one who has surrendered himself to You, and admit me among the righteous.” (Verse 101)*

This ending removes all notions of power and position, and the happiness of meeting long missed family members. The final scene thus appears to be one in which a true servant of God appeals to Him in all humility, requesting Him to enable him to maintain his faith until He gathers him to Himself, and admits him among His righteous servants. This represents the total and perfect success in all tests and trials.

6

One Message to Mankind

That is an account which We have now revealed to you, speaking of things that have been beyond your perception. You were not present when they [i.e. Joseph's brothers] resolved upon their plans and completed their schemes. (102)

ذَٰلِكَ مِنْ أَنْبَاءِ الْغَيْبِ نُوحِيهِ إِلَيْكَ وَمَا
كُنْتَ لَدَيْهِمْ إِذْ أَجْمَعُوا أَمْرَهُمْ وَهُمْ
مَمْكُورُونَ ﴿١٠٢﴾

Yet however strongly you may desire it, most people will not believe. (103)

وَمَا أَكْثَرُ النَّاسِ وَلَوْ حَرَصْتَ بِمُؤْمِنِينَ
﴿١٠٣﴾

You ask no recompense from them for it. It is but God's reminder to all mankind. (104)

وَمَا تَسْأَلُهُمْ عَلَيْهِ مِنْ أَجْرٍ إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا
ذِكْرٌ لِّلْعَالَمِينَ ﴿١٠٤﴾

Yet many are the signs in the heavens and the earth which they pass by, paying no heed to them. (105)

وَكَأَيِّن مِّنْ آيَةٍ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ
يَمُرُّونَ عَلَيْهَا وَهُمْ عَنْهَا مُعْرِضُونَ ﴿١٠٥﴾

And most of them do not even believe in God without also associating partners with Him. (106)

وَمَا يُؤْمِنُ أَكْثَرُهُم بِاللَّهِ إِلَّا وَهُمْ
مُشْرِكُونَ ﴿١٠٦﴾

Do they feel confident that the overwhelming scourge of God's punishment will not fall upon them, or that the Last Hour will not come upon them suddenly, taking them unawares. (107)

أَفَأَمِنُوا أَنْ تَأْتِيَهُمْ غَشِيَةٌ مِّنْ عَذَابِ اللَّهِ
أَوْ تَأْتِيَهُمُ السَّاعَةُ بَغْتَةً وَهُمْ لَا
يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿١٠٧﴾

Say: 'This is my way. I call [all mankind] to God on the basis of sure knowledge, I and all those who follow me. Limitless is God in His glory. I am not one of those who associate partners with Him.' (108)

Even before your time, We only sent [as messengers] men to whom We gave Our revelations, choosing them from among their people. Have they not travelled the land and seen what was the end of those [unbelievers] who lived before them? Better indeed is the life to come for those who remain God-fearing. Will you not, then, use your reason? (109)

When at length [Our] messengers lost all hope and thought that they were denied, Our help came to them, saving those whom We willed [to be saved]. Never can Our [mighty] punishment be averted from people who are guilty. (110)

Indeed their stories give a lesson to those who are endowed with understanding. This [revelation] could not possibly be an invented discourse. It is a confirmation of earlier revelations, an explanation of all things, as well as guidance and mercy for people who believe. (111)

قُلْ هَذِهِ سَبِيلِي أَدْعُوا إِلَى اللَّهِ عَلَىٰ
بَصِيرَةٍ أَنَا وَمَنِ اتَّبَعَنِي وَسُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ وَمَا
أَنَا مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿١٠٨﴾

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ قَبْلِكَ إِلَّا رِجَالًا نُوحِي
إِلَيْهِمْ مِنْ أَهْلِ الْقُرَىٰ أَفَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا فِي
الْأَرْضِ فَيَنْظُرُوا كَيْفَ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ
الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ ۗ وَلَدَارُ الْآخِرَةِ خَيْرٌ
لِلَّذِينَ اتَّقَوْا أَفَلَا تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿١٠٩﴾

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا اسْتَيْسَسَ الرُّسُلُ وَظَنُّوا أَنَّهُمْ قَدْ
كُذِّبُوا جَاءَهُمْ نَصْرُنَا فَنُجِّى مَنْ نَشَاءُ
وَلَا يُرَدُّ بَأْسُنَا عَنِ الْقَوْمِ الْمُجْرِمِينَ ﴿١١٠﴾

لَقَدْ كَانَ فِي قَصَصِهِمْ عِبْرَةٌ لِأُولِي
الْأَلْبَابِ ۗ مَا كَانَ حَدِيثًا يُفْتَرَىٰ
وَلَكِنْ تَصَدِيقَ الَّذِي بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ
وَتَفْصِيلَ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ وَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةً
لِقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١١١﴾

Overview

Having narrated Joseph's story in detail, the *sūrah* now begins commenting on it, pointing out some fundamental issues. To clarify these, it touches on certain aspects that are clearly apparent in the expanse of the universe around us, and others that are deep in the human soul, or relevant to former nations and communities, or which

belong to the realm that lies beyond the reach of human perception. We will discuss these as they occur in this final passage, pointing out at the outset that they are ordered with a specific objective in mind.

Turning Away from True Faith

Joseph's story was not one that the Arabian people among whom Muḥammad lived all his life used to relate. It includes certain secrets of which neither he nor his people were aware. In fact those secrets were known only to the people who lived through its events and took part in them. These had long gone. At the opening of the *sūrah*, God tells the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him): *"In revealing this Qur'ān We relate to you the best of narratives. Before it you were among those who are unaware [of revelation]."* (Verse 3) Now after the story has been told in full, the comment provided here is closely linked to its opening: *"That is an account which We have now revealed to you, speaking of things that have been beyond your perception. You were not present when they [i.e. Joseph's brothers] resolved upon their plans and completed their schemes."* (Verse 102)

That story, with all its intricate details, belongs to what is beyond your knowledge and perception. It is We who reveal it to you. The fact that it is a revelation from God is clearly seen in the fact that you could not have come to know of it by any other means. In so far as you are concerned, it has been something beyond the reach of your perception. You were not present with Joseph's brothers when they indulged in their consultations to which reference was made in different parts of the *sūrah*. Nor were you with them when they indulged in their scheming against Joseph, and against their father. Nor were you present with them after Joseph had detained his younger brother, when they were involved in earnest discussion, which involved some planning and scheming. This is also a reference to the scheming of the aristocrat women against Joseph, and of the people of the court who imprisoned him. All this scheming was not witnessed by the Prophet. It is a part of the revelation bestowed on him from on high and confirmed yet again in the revelation of this *sūrah*, which also confirms other issues of faith illustrated throughout the narrative.

The truth of revelation, the stories that it contains, the various aspects that move listeners' hearts should be sufficient to make people believe in the truth of the Qur'ān. They have seen the Prophet, known his character and personality, and listened to what he had to say. Yet most of them did not believe. They pass by the various signs that are everywhere in the expanse of the universe, without paying much attention to them or understanding their message. They are just like one who turns his face away so that he does not see what is in front of him. What are they waiting for, when it is a fact that God's punishment may overtake them when they

are unaware? *“Yet however strongly you may desire it, most people will not believe. You ask no recompense from them for it. It is but God’s reminder to all mankind. Yet many are the signs in the heavens and the earth which they pass by, paying no heed to them. And most of them do not even believe in God without also associating partners with Him. Do they feel confident that the overwhelming scourge of God’s punishment will not fall upon them, or that the Last Hour will not come upon them suddenly, taking them unaware.”* (Verses 103-107)

The Prophet was very keen that his people should believe, because he knew that his message contained everything that was good and he loved dearly that they should have that good in full. Moreover, he wanted to spare them the hardship that is bound to engulf unbelievers in this world and the punishment of the hereafter. However, God, who knows human nature and how people think and react, tells him that his desire will not lead the majority of unbelievers to faith. That is because they turn away from the numerous signs that are in the universe around them, staring them in the face. Their attitude takes them away from faith, making them unable to benefit from all these signs.

The Prophet is in no need of their positive response to faith. He does not seek any wages for providing them with guidance. In fact their attitude, turning away from these signs is very singular, considering that they are freely given to them. They are not asked to give anything in return: *“You ask no recompense from them for it. It is but God’s reminder to all mankind.”* (Verse 104) You are reminding them of God’s signs and messages, directing their eyes and minds to them. In fact these signs and messages are available to all mankind. They are not given specially to a particular community, race or tribe. No price is sought in return, so that rich people have an advantage over the poor. No condition is attached to them, so that those who are able to meet it would be favoured. They are a reminder for all mankind. Everyone can benefit from them without difficulty. *“Yet many are the signs in the heavens and the earth which they pass by, paying no heed to them.”* (Verse 105)

The signs that point to God’s existence, oneness and power are numerous, placed everywhere in the universe. They are held out in the heavens and the earth for all to see. They pass by them morning and evening, day and night. They almost speak to people, inviting them to reflect and contemplate. They are directly in front of all people, addressing their hearts and minds. Yet they prefer not to see them or listen to their messages. They turn a deaf ear and a sealed heart to their profound message.

It is sufficient to contemplate a sunrise or sunset for a moment, or to reflect on the shade and how it gently increases or decreases, or to look at the mighty sea, or gushing fountain. Reflect, if you will, on a growing plant, an emerging bud, a glowing flower and mature harvest. Or look at a bird flying as though it is swimming in the air, a fish swimming in water, worms that travel in the soil, ants going ceaselessly about their work. Contemplate the countless number of species and

communities of animals and insects. Only a moment of reflection in the depth of night or the great hassle of day, with the human mind receptive to the message given by life and existence is sufficient to make us shudder with awe and respond positively, recognizing the truth of God's oneness. Alas, most people pass by these signs, paying no heed to them and taking no notice of the message they all impart. Hence, the majority of people do not believe.

The Subtle Corruption of Faith

Yet even the believers among them allow an element of disbelief, in one form or another, to creep into their hearts. True faith requires being constantly alert so that any fleeting thought that Satan tries to sneak into our beliefs, and every worldly value in any action or attitude we take are removed straightaway. To do so is to ensure that we address all our actions to God alone. Pure faith needs a firm decision in the question of who has the supreme influence on people's hearts and actions. This ensures that all submission is to God alone. No one else has any position that requires even partial submission.

"And most of them do not even believe in God without also associating partners with Him." (Verse 106) They associate some earthly value in the way they consider events, matters and people, or give to something other than God's will or power a role in what brings them harm or benefit. Or they may acknowledge an element of submission to a ruler or master who does not confine himself to God's law alone; or they look up to someone other than God for the fulfilment of their hopes; or address their sacrifice in a way that seeks to win people's admiration; or strive to ensure some benefit or dispel harm but their striving is not done purely for God's sake; or they may allow something to creep into their worship which makes it not purely dedicated to God alone. Hence, the Prophet says: *"Shirk, i.e. associating partners with God, may be more subtle than the creeping of an ant."* [Related by Abū Ya'lā on the authority of Ma'qil ibn Yasār.]

The Prophet's statements give several examples of such subtle idolatry. `Abdullāh ibn `Umar quotes the Prophet as saying: "Whoever swears by something other than God commits idolatry." [Related by al-Tirmidhī.] `Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd reports that the Prophet says: "Charms and talismans are marks of idolatry." [Related by Ahmad and Abū Dāwūd.] He also says: "Whoever wears a charm associates partners with God." [Related by Ahmad.] The Prophet also relates a statement attributing it to God in a sacred *ḥadīth*: "I am the least in need of partners. If anyone does something, associating in it someone else with Me, I will abandon him to that partner."

In another *ḥadīth* the Prophet is quoted as saying: "When all generations, past, present and future, are gathered before God on the Day which will undoubtedly

come, an announcement will be made in the following words: ‘Whoever associated a partner with God in any action he did for God’s sake should seek its reward from someone other than God. For God is the least in need of partners.’”

Imām Ahmad relates that the Prophet warned: “What I fear most for you is little *shirk*.” When his Companions asked him to explain what he meant by little *shirk*, he said: “Hypocrisy. When people come with their deeds on the Day of Judgement, God says to them: ‘Go to those whom you used to flatter in your first life and seek your reward from them.’”

Such, then, are the subtle forms of associating partners with God. Hence constant alertness is required in order to remove any trace of it so that our faith is true and pure.

On the other hand, there is the clear and apparent form of associating partners with God, which means submission to a being other than God in any matter of this life. This may be in the form of submission to a law other than God’s. This is universally accepted. There is also submission to tradition, which may take the form of festivals and other occasions that people may accept without reference to God’s orders. People may submit to norms that violate God’s orders, as in the case of dress and clothing which reveals what God has ordered to remain covered. What we are talking about here goes beyond submission to a tradition or social custom which people do in flagrant disregard of God’s clear orders. That takes their behaviour from the realm of offences committed to make it a belief and a form of submission. This makes it far more serious indeed. Hence God says: “*And most of them do not even believe in God without also associating partners with Him.*” (Verse 106) This applies then to those Arabs whom the Prophet addressed directly and to other generations and communities throughout human life.

Enlightened Advocacy of Divine Faith

Now the question arises: what are those people waiting for when they continue to turn away and pay no heed to all the signs that are present in the universe pointing to God and His oneness? What are they waiting for after they have turned away from God’s revelations, for which they have been asked no recompense? “*Do they feel confident that the overwhelming scourge of God’s punishment will not fall upon them, or that the Last Hour will not come upon them suddenly, taking them unaware.*” (Verse 107)

This is a powerful touch which is meant to wake them up and shed their negligent attitude, so that they do not suffer its aftermath. The timing of God’s punishment is unknown to anyone. It may strike them suddenly, or it may be that the Last Hour is so near, and the Day of Judgement, with all its suffering may come suddenly, taking them unaware. The doors leading to the world beyond are all closed, allowing no eye

or ear to penetrate through it. No one knows what the next moment brings. How is it that those who turn away from God's signs feel secure?

The verses of the Qur'ān, which embody God's message, are within their grasp, and the signs God has placed in the universe are also there for all to behold and contemplate. But most people pass by both paying no heed, associating partners with God, either openly or in a subtle way. God's Messenger, however, will follow his own way, joined by those who follow him, maintaining the right path, without any deviation, and allowing nothing to influence their determination to follow it. *"Say: 'This is my way. I call [all mankind] to God on the basis of sure knowledge, I and all those who follow me. Limitless is God in His glory. I am not one of those who associate partners with Him.'"* (Verse 108)

"Say: 'This is my way.'" (Verse 108) It is a straightforward road, without any crookedness or concealed turns. There is no doubt about its being the right path. *"I call [all mankind] to God on the basis of sure knowledge, I and all those who follow me."* (Verse 108) We follow God's guidance which illuminates our way for us. We follow it with open eyes, knowledge and understanding. There is no groping in the dark or following sudden whims or fancies that lack solid foundation. We attribute to God nothing that does not suit His Lordship of the universe. We abandon those who associate partners with Him and show ourselves to follow a road that is completely distinct from any that is followed by those who associate partners with Him. *"Limitless is God in His glory. I am not one of those who associate partners with Him."* (Verse 108) I do no such thing, neither openly nor subtly. This is my way. Whoever wishes to follow me may do so. As for me, I am going along, regardless of who may wish to follow a different way.

The advocates of the divine cause must make this distinction very clearly. They must declare that they belong to a separate community that is distinct from anyone who does not belong to their faith, follow their way and obey their leadership. It is not sufficient that they should call on people to follow their religion while they themselves continue to be part of un-Islamic society. Such advocacy is of little value and produces little return. It is imperative that they should declare, right at the outset, that they are different from ignorant communities, and that they have their own distinctive community based on the bond of faith, and following Islamic leadership. They must distinguish themselves and their leadership from un-Islamic society and its leadership. If they stay within that society and constitute a part of it, deferring to its leadership, they undermine all the authority of their faith, all the results their message may achieve, and all the attraction that message may have.

This fact does not apply merely to Islamic advocacy among idolaters in pre-Islamic Arabia. It applies every time a state of *jāhiliyyah* prevails. *Jāhiliyyah* in the twentieth century does not differ, in its basic elements or distinctive features, from

any other state of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah*, which the Islamic message has had to face in any period of history.

Those who believe that they may achieve something by being diluted within un-Islamic society, or by presenting the message of Islam in a subtle way through such a society are mistaken. They do not fully understand the nature of the Islamic faith and how it appeals to hearts and minds. The advocates of atheism declare their identity and their goals. Would not the advocates of Islam declare their true identity and make their way clear? Would they not make clear that the route they follow is totally different from that of *jāhiliyyah*?

The Bearers of God's Message

The *sūrah* now refers to the divine law concerning the messages given to prophets who delivered them. It also refers to some of the signs shown in the fate met by some past generations. As a Messenger of God, Muḥammad has many predecessors, and his message is not without precedent. Hence people should consider what happened to earlier communities which did not believe their messengers and rejected the faith. Their fate provides some signs that are clearly visible to all beholders.

“Even before your time, We only sent [as messengers] men to whom We gave Our revelations, choosing them from among their people. Have they not travelled the land and seen what was the end of those [unbelievers] who lived before them? Better indeed is the life to come for those who remain God-fearing. Will you not, then, use your reason?” (Verse 109) Reflection on the fate of former communities is bound to shake even hardened hearts. We can imagine their movements, actions and feelings, and we can paint a picture of them going about their business in these places, going from one location to another, full of hope, fear and aspiration, and looking up to the future, then suddenly they are motionless, with all their faculties and senses completely dead. Their quarters are lifeless, and they have gone. All has come to nothing. A complete void is all that is left. Reflection on these facts is bound to shake even the most hardened and cruel of hearts. Therefore, the Qur'ān takes us by the hand to show us the fate of earlier communities, time after time.

“Even before your time, We only sent [as messengers] men to whom We gave Our revelations, choosing them from among their people.” (Verse 109) These messengers were neither angels nor any other species of creature. They were human beings, just like the people of the towns. Like you, they were not even desert people, so that they would be gentler and more compassionate, showing more perseverance in the difficult task of advocating the faith. The Prophet's message, then, follows the same pattern of revelation given to other messengers.

“Have they not travelled the land and seen what was the end of those [unbelievers] who

lived before them?" (Verse 109) Had they done so, they would have realized that their own fate is bound to be the same as that of those earlier communities who denied their messengers when they conveyed to them God's message. They would have realized that the pattern of God's dealings with earlier communities will apply to them, and that they themselves will soon depart along the same way.

"Better indeed is the life to come for those who remain God-fearing." (Verse 109) It is indeed infinitely better than this present life which is, by nature, a life of short duration. *"Will you not, then, use your reason?"* (Verse 109) You should use your reason to contemplate what happened to communities before you and guard against a similar fate. Reason will tell you to opt for the eternal life in preference to the fleeting comforts of this life.

The *sūrah* then describes the very hard period in the life of God's messengers, which precedes the decisive moment when God's promise is fulfilled and His law inevitably takes effect: *"When at length [Our] messengers lost all hope and thought that they were denied, Our help came to them, saving those whom We willed [to be saved]. Never can Our [mighty] punishment be averted from people who are guilty."* (Verse 110) This is a frightful scene, describing the great difficulties messengers face: the denials, persistent abuse and arrogant refusal to accept the truth. Days and years pass while they continue to convey God's message but meet with only very limited response. Years follow years while falsehood and evil continue to enjoy power and large followings, while the believers who are few in number, muster little or no power.

These are difficult times when evil swells its power, spreads tyranny and deals harshly and treacherously with advocates of the truth. God's messengers await His promise, but it is not fulfilled in this world. At these moments, disturbing thoughts occur to them: have they been belied? Have their souls deceived them when they hoped for victory in this life? No messenger of God would be in this position unless he had been exposed to a measure of distress, hardship, suffering and stress beyond the ability of any other human being to tolerate. I have never read this verse, or the other one in *Sūrah 2*, without feeling a strong shudder as I try to imagine the horror that would cause a messenger of God to entertain such feelings. The verse in *Sūrah 2* runs as follows:

"Do you reckon that you will enter paradise while you have not suffered like those [believers] who passed away before you? Affliction and adversity befell them, and so terribly shaken were they that the Messenger and the believers with him would exclaim, 'When will God's help come?' Surely, God's help is close at hand." (2: 214) Every time I read either of these two verses I could imagine this great horror giving rise to such feelings of despair, affliction and distress violently shaking a messenger of God, with his morale getting so low, and the pain in his heart so intolerable.

It is at this point when distress reaches its climax, leaving even the messenger powerless, that support is given in full measure, and victory is decisive: *“Our help came to them, saving those whom We willed [to be saved]. Never can Our [mighty] punishment be averted from people who are guilty.”* (Verse 110)

Qur’ānic Stories

Such is the normal line of events when it comes to advocacy of God’s message. Hardship and adversity are necessary until all the efforts and energy of its advocates are exhausted. When people so despair of victory, it is given by God. Those who deserve to be saved will be saved from the destruction that engulfs the others who deny the truth and from the tyranny of those who wield worldly power. God’s might strikes the evil-doers and they can in no way resist it. Neither their own nor their supporters’ power can prevent God’s punishment.

This is the normal way because God’s support does not come cheap. Had it been so, there would be a lot of frivolity about the advocacy of God’s message. There would be no shortage of people claiming to be advocates of the true message, since there would only be a small price to pay before God’s support were given. The message of the truth should never be treated with frivolity. It provides a complete way of life and a code to be implemented. Hence, it must be protected against false advocates who are not prepared to pay the price. When the price is high, and the truth emerges clearly against the background of hardship and adversity, true advocates are also distinguished by their steadfastness. They do not abandon their message even though they may feel that they will never see victory in their lifetime.

Advocacy of the divine message is not a short-term investment which must yield returns by a certain deadline, or people move to a different investment seeking better returns. No one who undertakes advocacy of God’s message in the hostile environment of un-Islamic society which submits to a power other than God’s can think that his task will be an easy one, or that his investment will yield quick returns. He must be clear in his mind that he stands against all tyranny in human life that commands physical and financial power, and which deludes the masses until they do all its bidding, even describing as black what they know to be white. Tyrants even turn the masses against the advocates of God’s message, tempting them with the satisfaction of their desires and putting in their minds the notion that God’s message and its advocates deprive them of such satisfaction.

Those who want to call on people to follow God’s message must realize that the task they undertake is tough and demanding. Not only so, but it is even tougher to join it against the power of *jāhiliyyah*. Hence the oppressed masses will not initially join it. Only those who prefer the truth, even though it requires the sacrifice of

comfort, safety and all the pleasures of the world, will rise to it. Such people are always few in number, but God will judge between them and their community on the basis of the truth after they have striven hard. It is only when God has judged for them that the masses will join them. This is when people embrace God's message in large numbers.

In Joseph's story we read about the different types of hardship he faced and his despair of people ever coming to realize the truth about him. The outcome however was very good, just as God had promised. For God's promise will always come true. Joseph's story is but an example of the histories of God's messengers. It provides lessons for those who wish to reflect. It confirms what earlier scriptures emphasized, even though Muḥammad had no access to these scriptures. What he preached could not have been a fabricated tale. Lies do not confirm one another. They neither provide guidance nor spread an air of mercy over believers' hearts. *"Indeed their stories give a lesson to those who are endowed with understanding. This [revelation] could not possibly be an invented discourse. It is a confirmation of earlier revelations, an explanation of all things, as well as guidance and mercy for people who believe."* (Verse 111)

Thus the beginning and the end of the *sūrah* are brought in line, just as the beginning and end of the story are perfectly matched. Comments at the opening and end of the *sūrah*, as well as those interspersed in the story relate perfectly to the theme and the way it is expressed. The religious objective of relating it is thus fulfilled, while providing an essential artistic element. This is coupled with the fact that it is a true story relating events that actually took place.

The whole story, from beginning to end, is told in a single *sūrah*, because its nature requires that. It is the gradual fulfilment of a dream, which evolves and takes shape day after day, and stage after stage. Hence, its lessons as well as artistic harmony cannot be clearly seen unless it is followed right through to its conclusion. This is different from relating episodes from the history of other messengers where highlighting a single episode serves a particular purpose. This is frequently done in the Qur'ān, as in the case of the story of the Prophet Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, or the birth of Mary, or that of Jesus, or the floods at the time of Noah. In all these cases, a single episode is related in order to serve a certain objective. Joseph's story, on the other hand, needs to be told altogether in order to draw its moral to the fore. God certainly tells the truth as He says: *"In revealing this Qur'ān We relate to you the best of narratives. Before it you were among those who are unaware [of revelation]."* (Verse 3)