

Prophet Yusuf (as)

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Yusuf ibn Yaqoob ibn Ishaq ibn Ibrahim. (Joseph, son of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham) is a prophet mentioned in the Qur'an, and corresponds to Joseph, a person from the Tanakh, the Jewish religious scripture, and the Christian Bible, who was estimated to have lived in Egypt before the New Kingdom. It is one of the common names in the Middle East and among Muslim nations. Of all of Jacob's children, Joseph was the one given the gift of prophecy. Although the narratives of other prophets are mentioned in various Surahs, the complete narrative of Joseph is given only in one Surah, Yusuf, making it unique. It is said to be the most detailed narrative in the Qur'an and bears more details than the Biblical counterpart.

Yusuf is believed to have been the eleventh son of Yaqoob, and, according to many scholars, his favourite. According to Ibn Kathir, "Jacob had twelve sons who were ancestors of the tribes of the Israelites. The noblest, of them was Joseph." The story begins with Joseph revealing a dream he had to his father, which Jacob recognizes. In addition to the role of God in his life, the story of Yusuf and Zulaikha (Potiphar's wife of the Old Testament) became a popular subject in Persian literature, where it became considerably elaborated over the centuries.

In the Qur'an

There are more than one hundred verses, and in totality, they encompass many years and "present an amazing variety of sciences and characters in a

tightly-knit plot, and offer a dramatic illustration of some of the fundamental themes of the Qur'an." The Qur'an itself relates to the story's importance in the third verse: "and We narrate to you the best of stories." Most scholars believe this is referring to Joseph's story, while others, including Tabari, argue it is a reference to the Qur'an as a whole. It asserts and documents the execution of God's rulings despite the challenge of human intervention ("Allah has full power and control over His affairs; but most amongst mankind do not know.")

This is what the story of Yusuf confirms categorically, for it ends with comfort and marvels, which is described in the Qur'an. Along with the story, there is also some commentary from some leading scholars of Islam.

Joseph before the dream

In Tabari's chapter, the physical beauty of Joseph and his mother Rahyl is introduced, in that they were said to have had more beauty than any other human being. His father, Jacob ('Yaqaob), had given him to his oldest sister to be raised. Tabari comments that there was no greater love than what Joseph's aunt felt for him. She raised Joseph as her own. She was very reluctant to give him back, she kept him until her death. Jacob was very reluctant to give up Joseph, and thus, favoured him when they were together. This is commentary, but, as is the profession of commentators, this provides an interesting setup to Joseph's personal story and also lays a foundation for future interaction with his brothers, particularly Benjamin.

The dream

The story begins with a dream and ends with its interpretation. As the sun appeared over the horizon, bathing the earth in its morning glory, Joseph, one of the sons of Jacob, awoke from his sleep, delighted by a pleasant dream, he was filled with excitement, he ran to his father and reported what he had seen.

Yusuf said to his father: “O Father! I saw eleven stars and the sun and the moon: I saw them prostrating before me!”

Qur'an 12: 4

According to Ibn Kathir, Jacob knew that Joseph would someday become extremely important and would be in a high position, both in this world and the next - he recognized the stars represented his brothers and the sun and moon represented himself and Joseph's mother, Rachel. Jacob advised Joseph not to disclose his dream in order to protect him from the jealousy of his brothers, who were already unhappy about the love Jacob felt for Joseph. Ya'qoob foresaw that Yusuf would be one through whom the prophecy of his grandfather, Abraham would be fulfilled, and in that his offspring would keep the light of Abraham's house alive and spread God's message to mankind.

Ya'qoob told Yusuf: "Son, do not relate your dream to your brothers, lest they concoct a plot against you, for Satan is an enemy of humanity. Thus, your Lord has selected you and given you the knowledge to interpret dreams and

visions, and has perfected his blessing's upon you, and upon the family of Jacob just as he perfected it on your forefathers before: Ibrahim and Ishaq (Isaac). Your Lord is Knowing, Wise." (Qur'an 12: 5 - 6)

Joseph did not tell his brothers about his dream, unlike in the version relayed in the Hebrew Bible, but their dislike of him was strong. Joseph was known, in addition to being very handsome, to be of gentle temperament. He was respectful, kind, and considerate. His brother Benjamin was equally pleasant and both were from the same mother, Rachel.

Narrated Abu Huraira: Some people asked the Prophet: "Who is the most honourable among people?" He replied, "The most honourable person is Yusuf."

The plot against Joseph

The Qur'an continues with Joseph's brothers plotting to kill him. It relates: "in Joseph and his brothers are signs for those who seek answers. When Joseph's brother said about him: "He is more loved by our father than we are, though we are a group. Our father is clearly mistaken. Let us kill Joseph, so father's attention be drawn towards us, after Joseph we will become a community of truthful ones."

One of the brothers argued against killing him and suggested that they throw him into a well, so that a caravan may pick him up and take him into slavery. Mujahid, a scholar, says that it was Simeon and Suddi says it was Judah while

Qatadah and Ibn Is-haq says that it was the eldest brother, Ruben. Said one of them: "Slay not Joseph, but if you must do something, throw him down a well: he will be picked up by some caravan of travellers."

Killing Joseph out of jealousy would have been extreme, but scholars also suggested that Joseph was fairly young when he was thrown into the well, as young as twelve. He would live to be 110, or 120.

The brothers asked their father to let them take Joseph out to the desert to play and promised to watch over him. Not thrilled with the idea of knowing how much the brothers disliked Joseph, Jacob hesitated. Tabari comments that Jacobs's excuse was that they might hurt him, but the brothers insisted. When they had Joseph alone they threw him down a well and left him there, they returned with a blood stained shirt and lied that he had been attacked by a wolf, but their father did not believe them, as he was a sincere man who loved his son.

The Qur'an says:

They said: "O father! why don't you trust us with Joseph,- seeing we are his sincere well-wishers? Send him with us tomorrow to enjoy himself and play, we will take every care of him." Jacob said: "Really it saddens me that you should take him away, for I fear lest a wolf should devour him, while you attend not to him." They said: "If a wolf were to devour him, then we indeed should be the first to perish!" So they took him, they all agreed to throw him down a well: and so We put into Joseph's heart this message: 'One day you

shall tell them the truth of this affair while they will not recognize you.' Then they came to their father in the early part of the night, weeping. They said: "O our father! We went racing and left Joseph with our belongings; and a wolf devoured him, but we know you do not believe us, though we are telling you the truth." They stained his shirt with false blood. Jacob said: "Nay, your minds have made up this tale, but patience is most befitting for me. Allah alone can help me"...

Qur'an 12: 11 - 18

Tabari comments that Judah stopped the brothers from causing more harm to Joseph, and that he would bring him food. Ibn Kathir comments that Reuben (the eldest brother) suggested that they put him in the pit so that he might return later to bring him back home, but when he returned, he found Joseph gone. "So he screamed and tore his clothes. He put blood on the coat of Joseph. When Jacob learned of this, he tore his clothes, wore a black cloak, and was sad for many days." Ibn 'Abbas writes that the "reason for this test of Jacob was that he had slaughtered a sheep while he was fasting. He asked a neighbour of his to eat it, but the neighbour refused. So God tested him with the matter of Joseph." The section that describes Joseph's revelation in the well is interpreted by Ibn 'Abbas: "When they were unaware" (Qur'an 12:15) means "you will tell them about what they did in a situation in which they will not recognize you." A possible reason for Joseph's enslavement was that after Abraham had left Egypt he took slaves with him, but Abraham did not dismount for them (the slaves followed Abraham barefoot). Therefore, God revealed to him: "Since you did not alight for the slaves and those walking

barefoot with you, I will punish you by selling one of your descendants into his country.'"

God's plan to save Joseph

A passing caravan took Joseph. They had stopped by the well to draw water to quench their thirst and saw the boy inside. So they retrieved him and sold him into slavery in Egypt, to a wealthy man referred to as Al-Aziz in the Qur'an, or Potiphar in the Bible. Joseph was taken to Al-Aziz's home, who told his wife to treat him well.

Then there came a caravan of travellers: they sent their water-carrier for water, and he let down his bucket into the well. He said: "Ah! Good news! Here is a fine young man!" So they concealed him as a treasure. Allah knew what they were doing. They sold him for a miserable price, for a few dirhams: such low estimation did they hold him! The man in Egypt who bought him, said to his wife: "Make his stay honourable, for he may bring us some good, or we shall adopt him as our son." Thus did We establish Joseph in the land, so that We might teach him the interpretation of dreams and visions. Allah has power and control over all His affairs; but most among mankind do not know. When Joseph attained His full manhood, We gave him power and knowledge. We do reward those who are righteous in conduct.

Qur'an 12: 19 – 22

This is the point of the story that many scholars of Islam report as being central to Joseph's story. Joseph moves to a high position in his household. Later, the brothers would come to Egypt but would not recognize Joseph but called him by the same title, "Al-Aziz."

While working for 'Aziz, Joseph grew to be a man. The wife of 'Aziz constantly approached him (*Zuleika*) who intended to seduce him. Tabari writes that he did not succumb to her because when they were alone, the "figure of Jacob appeared before him, standing in the house and biting his fingers ..." and warned Joseph not to get involved with her. Tabari, again, says "God turned him away from his desire for evil by giving him a sign that he should not do it." It is said that after the death of her husband (*Al-Aziz*), Joseph married Zuleika.

She in whose house he was, sought to seduce him: she locked the doors, and said: "Come to me O you dear one!" He said: "Allah forbid, for your husband is my lord! he has been very kind to me! truly no good comes upon those who do wrong!" With a strong passion did she desire him, he would have desired her, had he not seen evidence of his Lord. We did turn away from him all evil and shameful deeds: for he was one of Our servants, sincere and purified.

Qur'an 12: 23 – 24

Zuleika is said to have then ripped the back of Joseph's shirt, while they raced towards the main door where her husband was waiting. At that point she attempted to blame Joseph and suggested that he had attacked her. However, Joseph said that it was Zuleika who had attempted to seduce him and his account is confirmed by one of the household. Aziz believed Joseph and told his wife to beg forgiveness. One member of the family, it is disputed who (perhaps a cousin) told Aziz to check his shirt. If it was torn on the front, Joseph was guilty and his wife innocent, but if it was torn in the back, Joseph was innocent and his wife guilty. It was torn in the back so Aziz reprimands his wife for lying.

Zuleika circle of friends thought that she was becoming infatuated with Joseph and mocked her for being in love with a slave. She invited them to her home and gave them all apples, and knives to peel them with. She then had Joseph walk through and distract the women who cut themselves with the knives. Zuleika then pointed out that she had to see Joseph every day.

Joseph prayed to God and said that he would prefer prison to the things that Zuleika and her friends wanted. According to Tabari, sometime later, even though Aziz knew that Joseph was innocent, he grew disgusted with himself for having let Joseph go free. It seemed good to them to imprison him for a while. It is possible that Zuleika had influence here, rebuking her husband for having her honour threatened.

The account of Joseph and the wife of 'Aziz is called "Yusuf and Zulaikha," and has been told and retold countless times in many languages. The Qur'anic account differs from the Biblical version in which Potiphar believes his wife and throws Joseph into prison.

Joseph interprets dreams

This account refers to the interaction between Joseph and the ruler of Egypt. Unlike the references to the Pharaoh in the account of Musa, the account of Joseph refers to the Egyptian ruler as a malik (**king**), not a Fir'on (**pharaoh**). After Joseph had been imprisoned for a few years, God granted him the ability to interpret dreams, a power that made him popular amongst the prisoners. One event concerns two royal servants who, prior to Joseph's imprisonment, had been thrown into the dungeon for attempting to poison the food of the king – whose name is not given either in the Qur'an or the Bible – and his family. Joseph asked them about the dreams they had, and one of them described that he saw himself pressing grapes into wine. The other said he had seen himself holding a basket of bread on his head and birds were eating from it. Joseph reminded the prisoners that his ability to interpret dreams was a favour from God based on his adherence to monotheism. Joseph then stated that one of the men (**the one who dreamt of squeezing grapes for wine**) would be released from the prison and serve the king, but warned that the other would be executed.

The king had a dream of seven fat cows being eaten by seven skinny ones and seven ears of corn being replaced with shrivelled ones, and he was terrified. None of his advisors could interpret it. When the servant who was released

from prison heard about it, he remembered Joseph from prison and persuaded the king to send him to Joseph so that he could return with an interpretation. Joseph told the servant that Egypt would face seven years of prosperity and then suffer seven years of famine and that the king should prepare for it so as to avoid great suffering.

Tabari notes that when the messenger came to Joseph and invited him to come to the king, Joseph replied "Go back to your lord and ask him about the case of the women who cut their hands. My lord surely knows their guile." Ibn Kathir agrees with Tabari saying that Joseph sought "restitution for this in order that Aziz might know that he was not false to him during his absence" and that Zuleika eventually confessed that nothing happened between them. Tabari inserts an interesting interaction between Joseph and the angel Gabriel in which Gabriel helps Joseph both gain his freedom and admit to his own desires.

Joseph said, "What you cultivate during the next seven years, when the time of harvest comes, leave the grains in their spikes, except for what you eat. After that, seven years of drought will come, which will consume most of what you stored for them. After that, a year will come that brings relief for the people, and they will, once again, press juice." (Qur'an 12:47 - 49) Joseph was brought to king and interpreted the dream.

When he became aware of Yusuf's innocence, the king said, "Bring him to me so I may subject him for my personal service." Then, when he spoke to Joseph, the king said: "Today, you are among us high in rank and fully trusted." (Qur'an 12: 54) Upon speaking with Yusuf, the king recognized his virtues,

great ability, brilliance, good conduct and perfect mannerisms. Yusuf said, "Put me in charge of the storehouses of the land; I will guard them." (Qur'an 12: 55). Thus Yusuf asked the king to appoint him as Minister of Finance.

The family reunion

Joseph became extremely powerful. Ibn Kathir relates that the king of Egypt had faith in Joseph and that the people loved and revered him. It is said that Joseph was 30 when he was summoned to the king. "The king addressed him in 70 languages, and each time Joseph answered him in that language." Ibn Is-haq comments, "the king of Egypt converted to Islam at the hands of Joseph."

Joseph's brothers, in the meantime, had suffered while the people of Egypt prospered under Joseph's guidance. Jacob and his family were hungry and the brothers went to Egypt, unaware that Joseph was there and in such a high position. Joseph gave them what they needed, but questioned them, and they reveal that there were once twelve of them. They lie and say that the one most loved by their father, meaning Joseph, died in the desert. Joseph tells them to bring Benjamin, the youngest, to him. They return home to Jacob and persuade him to let Benjamin accompany them in order to secure food. Jacob insists that they bring Benjamin back - and this time the brothers are honest when they swear to it. According to Ibn Kathir, Jacob ordered the brothers to use many gates when returning to Egypt because they were all handsome. The Qur'an itself elaborates that Jacob sensed Joseph.

When the brothers return with Benjamin, Joseph reveals himself to Benjamin. He then gives the brothers the supplies he promised, but also put the king's cup into one of the bags. He then proceeds to accuse them of stealing, which the brothers deny. Joseph informs them that whoever it was who stole the cup will be enslaved to the owner and the brothers agree, not realizing the plot against them. The cup was found in Benjamin's sack.

After much discussion and anger, the brothers try to get Benjamin released by offering themselves instead - they must keep their promise to their father. Reuben stays behind with Benjamin in order to keep his promise to his father. When the other brothers inform Jacob of what has happened, Jacob does not believe them and becomes blind after crying much over the disappearance of his son. Forty years had passed since Joseph was taken from his father, and Jacob had held it in his heart. Jacob sends the brothers back to find out about Benjamin and Joseph. Upon their return Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and gives them one of his shirts to give to Jacob.

When Jacob receives the shirt, this time as good news, Jacob lays it on his face and regains his vision. Jacob says, "Did I not tell you that I know from God what you do not know?" ([Qur'an 12: 96](#)). Tabari says that this means that "from the truth of the interpretation of Joseph's dream in which he saw eleven planets and the sun and the moon bowing down to him, he knew that which they did not know."

Joseph was reunited with his family, and his dream as a child came true as he saw his parents and eleven of his brothers bow before him in love, welcome and respect. Ibn Kathir mentions that his mother had died. Tabari says that

she was alive. Joseph eventually died in Egypt. Tradition holds that when Moses left Egypt, he took Joseph's coffin with him so that he would be buried alongside his ancestors in Canaan (**Allah knows best**).

Death and burial

It is hard to find sources that consistently agree on the actual dates of Joseph's life. Scholars tend to see the story as a way for the descendants of Abraham to find their way to Egypt. Joseph was the reason that the Israelites moved to Egypt, which then allows for the story of Moses and the Exodus from Egypt to take place.

According to Islamic tradition, the biblical Joseph is buried in Hebron, next to the Cave of the Patriarchs where a medieval structure known as Yusuf-Kahlah, the "Castle of Joseph", is located.