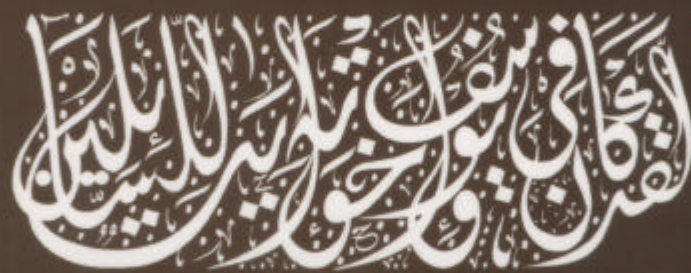


THE
PROPHET JOSEPH

in the Qur'an, the Bible, and History



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4

Prophet Joseph on His Way to Egypt

This chapter examines the story of Joseph beginning from when his brothers take and abandon him away from his father's house to his entry into Egypt.

فَلَمَّا ذَهَبُوا بِهِ وَأَجْمَعُوا أَن يَجْعَلُوهُ فِي غَيَابَتِ الْجُبِّ وَأَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْهِ لَتُنَبِّئَنَّهُمْ بِأَمْرِهِمْ هَذَا وَهُمْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ

﴿١٥﴾

So when they took him away and agreed that they should throw him to the bottom of the well, and We revealed to him: "You will certainly inform them of this affair of theirs while they are unaware" (15).

Although stressing that Joseph's brothers took him, the verse does not state explicitly whether that happened with or without Jacob's permission. Significantly, this verse occurs after a verse in which Jacob's sons had the last words in their conversation with their father as they tried to convince him: "They said: 'If a wolf would devour him despite the fact that we are a band, we are then certainly a failing group.'" This implies that Joseph's brothers took him with their father's permission. Indeed, we will see later in the story Jacob remind his sons, when they asked him to send Benjamin with them to Egypt, that he "entrusted" them with Joseph but they betrayed that trust: "He said: 'Should I entrust you with him, would I be doing other than what I did before when I entrusted you with his brother? So, Allah is the best protector, and He is the most Merciful of the merciful ones'" (12.64). This proves that Jacob's sons took Joseph with the permission of their father. Note that the verb *آَمَنَ عَلَى* "entrust someone with" is the same verb that occurred in Joseph's brothers' request, "O our father! Why do you not entrust us with Joseph? Surely we seek good for him," implying that at the end Jacob agreed to the request.

I have already shown that Jacob was aware that Joseph's brothers harbored evil for their brother; why, then, did he agree that they take him? The answer to this question has two sides that may be described as

“apparent” and “subtle.” I will start with the former. We have seen in our study of Jacob’s reply, “It saddens me that you should take him away, and I fear that a wolf might devour him while you are not attending to him,” that he was so keen on changing the attitude of his sons toward Joseph that he did not want to say explicitly that he saw them as a source of potential danger to Joseph. He preferred to attribute any harm that may occur to Joseph to an external source, mentioning a wolf. It seems that Jacob reckoned that if Joseph’s brothers would take him with them that might improve the way they felt about Joseph, so he agreed to their request.

We should not forget that the verse “send him with us *ghadan* (in the early morning) to enjoy himself and play, and surely we shall be protective of him” does not refer to a discussion that occurred on *one day* between Jacob and his sons and ended up with him agreeing to their request to take Joseph with them the next day. This is what many may think because of mistaking the word غَدًا “*ghadan*” to mean “the following day,” when in fact it means “in the early morning” of any day. This verse refers to the pretext that Joseph’s brothers used to persuade their father to send Joseph with them, a pretext that they would have used in their discussion with him over many days until he agreed in good faith to their request.

Jacob’s keenness on changing his sons’ feelings toward Joseph may not be sufficient to explain the great risk that he took by allowing them to take Joseph away. This takes us from the “apparent” to the “subtle” explanation of Jacob’s acceptance of his sons’ request: Allah made Jacob agree to his sons’ request so that the story of Joseph would unravel as He decreed.

The verb وَأَجْمَعُوا “and [they] agreed” indicates that *all* of Joseph’s brothers agreed to throw him to the bottom of the well. This is in line with my already mentioned conclusion that the fact that the conversation about how to get rid of Joseph ended with the verse “one of them said: ‘Do not kill Joseph, but cast him down into the bottom of the well where some caravanners will pick him up, if you would do something [to him]’” (12.10) means that they all agreed to that plan. Note that the verb يَجْعَلُوهُ “[they] should put him” shows that by putting Joseph in the well, Joseph’s brothers did not intend to kill him, but wanted some passers-by to rescue him and take him to a land far from where his father lived.

After Jacob’s sons lowered Joseph to the bottom of the well, Allah revealed to him: “You will certainly inform them of this affair of theirs while they are unaware.” He told Joseph that one day he will mention this plot to his brothers, and that this would come as a complete surprise to them. Indeed, this is what happened many years later in Egypt. Verses 12.89-90 describe how Joseph reminded his brothers of their evil scheme against

him while they were totally unaware that the dignitary they had been visiting was in fact their brother Joseph whom they cast to the bottom of the well years earlier: “He said: ‘Do you know how you treated Joseph and his brother when you were ignorant?’ (12.89). They said: ‘Are you indeed Joseph?’. He said: ‘I am Joseph and this is my brother; Allah has indeed conferred on us favors; surely, as for he who acts dutifully and patiently, Allah does not waste the reward of the good-doers’ (12.90).”

Allah’s revelation brought much kindness, care, and mercy to the child Joseph who was in grave distress. Joseph would have badly missed his father when he realized what his brothers were going to do to him. Allah’s consolation, however, was greater than any consolation that Joseph could have received from any human being, including his father.³⁰

وَجَاءَ آبَاهُمْ عِشَاءً يَبْكُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

And they came to their father *‘ishā’an* (at night), weeping (16).

Joseph’s brothers returned home pretending to cry for their brother. The mention of the verse that the time of the return was *عِشَاءً* “*ishā’an* (at night)” confirms my interpretation of the word “*ghadan*” in verse 12.12 as meaning “in the early morning.” Allah tells us that after taking their brother with them in the early morning, Joseph’s brothers came back at night without him.

Al-Qurṭubī believes that Joseph’s brothers chose to return at night because that would have helped them make up the story about what happened, as their faces would not be seen in the darkness of the night. But even if that was true, they must have given their father another reason for getting back late. Let us remember that verse 12.12 indicates that Joseph was with his brothers in the early hours of the morning in summer, which means that they got back 10-12 hours after they should have brought Joseph back to his father. They were supposed to return him before the sun reached a high point in the sky and it became too hot.

Joseph’s brothers were keen on pretending that they cared about Joseph and were sad to lose him, so they would have been expected to tell their father about Joseph’s death immediately after they knew about it. What, then, was their excuse for returning late? We will see in the next two verses Joseph’s brothers untruthfully claim that a wolf has devoured Joseph, and that they could find only his blood-stained shirt. This leads me to conclude that Joseph’s brothers must have claimed that they could not come back before night because they kept on looking for Joseph’s body until the night set in.

Probably, Joseph's brothers thought that getting back at night would provide cover for their lie. If they had told their father about what had happened to Joseph in the morning he would have certainly asked them to take him to where they left Joseph or found his shirt. By returning during the night, they guaranteed that Jacob would not be able to go before the next morning to wherever Joseph was supposed to have been devoured by the wolf and they found his shirt. If Jacob went there in the morning and did not find anything supporting his sons' claims, that would not represent a problem for them. They could claim that beasts or the elements had removed any trace of their brother. In fact, we will see in verse 12.18 that Jacob knew that it was useless to try to search for Joseph, so his only reaction to the news of losing his son was to leave the matter in the hands of Allah.

The well that Joseph's brothers chose was far enough from their home to prevent Joseph from returning home should the person who found him try to identify his family and return him home. This could have been one reason that *forced* them not to come back before night.

قَالُوا يَا أَبَانَا إِنَّا ذَهَبْنَا نَسْتَبِقُ وَتَرَكْنَا يُوسُفَ عِنْدَ مَتْعِنَا فَاكَلَهُ الذِّئْبُ وَمَا أَنْتَ بِمُؤْمِنٍ لَّنَا وَلَوْ كُنَّا صَادِقِينَ

﴿١٧﴾

They said: "O our father! We went to race with one another and left Joseph with our belongings, so a wolf devoured him; and you will not believe us though we are truthful" (17).

Joseph's brothers started their speech to their father with the loving phrase "O our father!" to create a friendly atmosphere that might help to make him believe the painful details they were going to tell him.

The use of Joseph's brothers of the clause ذَهَبْنَا نَسْتَبِقُ "we went to race with one another"³¹ instead of the verb استبقنا "we raced with one another" means that their race included going to a relatively far distance from the starting point. The fake story about the race was used by Joseph's brothers to justify leaving Joseph alone with their belongings, as it is obvious that young Joseph could not take part in this activity.

Joseph's brothers deliberately combined their claim of being busy racing with the claim about Joseph being devoured by a wolf. The latter is a danger that Jacob himself suggested: "and I fear that a wolf might devour him while you are not attending to him." They thought that their story was thus more likely to be believed by their father as he himself had acknowledged this possibility.

It is clear from their plan that Joseph's brothers wanted to convince

their father that Joseph was actually dead, not merely missing. The thought that only Joseph's death would make Jacob ultimately forget his son.

By saying to their father "you will not believe us though we are truthful," Jacob's sons suggested that they had to convey to him what happened even though they were aware of his suspicions about their intention. They stressed that their story was true by reminding their father that his failure to believe them was due to the suspicions that he already had, not because their story was fake. They tried to make their father develop doubts about the suspicions that were inevitably going to appear in his mind about their story, and thus making him believe it.

وَجَاءُوا عَلَىٰ قَمِيصِهِ بِدَمٍ كَذِبٍ قَالَ بَلْ سَوَّلَتْ لَكُمْ أَنفُسُكُمْ أَمْرًا فَصَبِرُوا ۖ جَمِيلٌ ۗ وَاللَّهُ الْمُسْتَعَانُ عَلَىٰ مَا

تَصِفُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

And they came with false blood on his shirt. He said: "[No,] rather your souls have suggested to you [doing] something [evil]; so, [my course is] perfect patience. And it is Allah whose help is sought against what you describe" (18).

Joseph's brothers brought his shirt to their father after smearing it with blood, which was not actually Joseph's, as proof that their brother was devoured by a wolf. The plan that Joseph's brothers followed to deceive Jacob reflects their failure to appreciate the depth of the knowledge of this prophet. Allah conferred on Jacob "*ta'wīl al-aḥādīth* (the interpretation of talks)," making him able to read through simple things and signs present and future events, as we saw in his interpretation of his son's dream. Jacob, therefore, was not going to believe his sons' story about the death of Joseph. He knew through Joseph's dream, and whatever other sources of knowledge that Allah made available to him, certain facts about the future of Joseph and the rest of family. Indeed, we will see later how Jacob tells critics of his undiminished hope of seeing Joseph again, years after his disappearance: "and I know from Allah what you do not know" (from 12.86).

I should cite a particular event that reveals the extent of Jacob's sons' underestimation of the knowledge and paranormal abilities that Allah conferred on their father. Many years after the sudden disappearance of Joseph, Jacob was one day able to smell the scent of his son through a shirt that Joseph sent to him, when the shirt was still at a far distance from Jacob's living place: "And when the camel caravan had departed, their father said: 'I perceive the scent of Joseph; may you not disbelieve me!'" (12.94). The recipient of such divine favor was undoubtedly able to know

أَفْعَلُ مَا تُؤْمَرُ سَتَجِدُنِيَ إِنْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ مِنَ الصَّابِرِينَ ﴿١٠٢﴾ فَلَمَّا أَسْلَمَا وَتَلَّهُ لِلْجَبِينِ
 ﴿١٠٣﴾ وَنَدَيْنَاهُ أَنْ يَا إِسْمَاعِيلُ ﴿١٠٤﴾ قَدْ صَدَّقْتَ الرُّءْيَا إِنَّا كَذَلِكَ نَجْزِي الْمُحْسِنِينَ
 ﴿١٠٥﴾ إِنَّ هَذَا هُوَ الْبَلَاءُ الْأَمِينُ ﴿١٠٦﴾ وَنَدَيْنَاهُ بِذَبْحٍ عَظِيمٍ ﴿١٠٧﴾. (سورة
 الصّافات).

And when he [Abraham's son, Ishmael] was old enough to work with him [his father Abraham], he [Abraham] said: "O son! I see in a dream that I am sacrificing you, so let me know what you think." He [Ishmael] said: "O father! Do what you are commanded to do; Allah-willing, you will find me one of those with patience" (37.102). So when they submitted [to Allah's command], and he [Abraham] laid him [Ishmael] on his forehead (37.103). And We called to him saying: "O Abraham! (37.104). You have fulfilled the vision." Indeed, this is how we reward the good-doers (37.105). Surely this was a manifest trial (37.106). And we ransomed him [Ishmael] with a tremendous sacrifice (37.107).

Great stances such as these reveal some of the unique nature of Allah's prophets and the close servants whom He has chosen for Himself and distinguished from other people.

وَجَاءَتْ سَيَّارَةٌ فَأَرْسَلُوا وَارِدَهُمْ فَأَدْلَلَ دَلْوَهُ قَالَ يَا بُشْرَى هَذَا غُلَامٌ وَأَسْرُوهُ بِضَعَّةٍ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ بِمَا
 يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

And there came a caravan³³. They [the caravanners] sent someone to draw some water, and he let down his bucket; he said: "O good news! Here is a young boy"; and they concealed him as an article of merchandise, and Allah was aware of what they were doing (19).

In the verse above, the Qur'an takes us back to the place where Jacob's sons left their brother hoping that some travelers would help him out of the well and take him to a far land: "One of them said: 'Do not kill Joseph, but cast him down into the bottom of the well where some caravanners will pick him up, if you would do something [to him]'" (12.10). Verse 12.19 tells us that this was exactly what happened. A caravan of travelers arrived to the area and sent someone to get them water from the well in which Joseph was thrown. When that traveler sent the bucket down the well, he was surprised to see Joseph, something that he considered to be "good news." His words "here is a young boy" show that Joseph was a little child then, as we have seen implied by the Qur'an earlier on.

While it is unclear how long Joseph stayed in the well, he was probably found shortly after he was cast there. As I explained in my

interpretation of verse 12.10, Joseph's brothers would have chosen a well that is on a travel route to ensure that their brother gets rescued and does not die at the bottom of the well.

The verb *أسرّوه* "*asarra*" means "to make something a secret" or "to treat it as a secret," hence I have translated the clause *وَأَسْرُوهُ بِضَعَّةً* as "and they concealed him as an article of merchandise," i.e. the travelers hid Joseph with their goods. Exegetes have disagreed about the identity of the plural pronoun implied in the verb *وَأَسْرُوهُ* "and they concealed him." Some agree with the old exegete Mujāhid that it refers to the caravanners. The others accept Ibn 'Abbās' view that it refers to Joseph's brothers.

The latter group of exegetes, who represent the majority, think that Joseph's brothers threatened to kill him if he revealed the truth, and forced him to pretend that he was their slave in order to sell him to the caravan. The Qur'anic verse, however, contains absolutely nothing to support this view. In fact, this interpretation reflects the exegetes' influence by the Biblical narrative which claims that Joseph's brothers sold him to caravanners.

I think that this interpretation is completely wrong. I am inclined toward the apparent meaning of the verse that the implied plural pronoun in *وَأَسْرُوهُ* "and they concealed him" refers to travelers in the caravan. It is clear that the conjunction *وَ* "and" links this verb to the plural verb *أَرْسَلُوا* "[they] sent" which precedes it in the same verse and which definitely refers to the caravanners, not to Joseph's brothers. Additionally, the clause "and they concealed him as an article of merchandise" makes it clear that the reference is to the travelers not to Joseph's brothers.³⁴

Allah's words "and Allah was aware of what they were doing" are a reminder that He was present and watching when the travelers took Joseph away from his father's land, that He was aware of everything they were doing, and that they were not able to do anything that He would not allow to happen. This reminder brings to mind what Allah said in a previous verse when Joseph's brothers put him in the well: "and We revealed to him: 'You will certainly inform them of this affair of theirs while they are unaware'." In verse 12.19 Allah gives a reminder that He was present, witnessing everything that was taking place, and that none of those events would have taken place had He not wanted them to happen for subtle goals that subsequent events would unveil.

وَشَرَوْهُ بِثَمَنٍ بَخْسٍ دَرَاهِمَ مَعْدُودَةٍ وَكَانُوا فِيهِ مِنَ الزَّاهِدِينَ ﴿٢٠﴾

And they sold him for a low price, a few silver coins, and they were disinterested in keeping him (20).

Note that the words *شَرَوْهُ* “they sold him,” *كَانُوا* “they were,” and *الزَّاهِدِينَ* “disinterested in keeping” refer to the same plural pronoun implied in the verbs *أَرْسَلُوا* “[they] sent,” *أَسْرَوْهُ* “they concealed him,” and *يَعْمَلُونَ* “they were doing” in the previous verse. Since the selling of Joseph occurred in Egypt, as we will see when we study the next verse, it is obvious that the sellers must have been the travelers not Joseph’s brothers. This confirms my comments on the previous verse that it was caravanners not Joseph’s brothers who concealed Joseph with their goods.

There are three opinions about the meaning of the adjective *بَخْسٍ* “*bakhsin*,” which I have translated as “low.” The first two indicate that “*bakhsin*” means “unjust” and “forbidden,” respectively. The third and most common view suggests that this word means “undervalued.” In the latter case, describing the price as “undervalued” may indicate that it was below the average price of a slave at the time. It is more likely, however, that the meaning is that any fee that the travelers would receive for Joseph would be “low,” because anyone who would sell Joseph would inevitably be a loser, for giving away this noble servant of Allah for money. Support for this interpretation of the meaning of “*bakhsin*” could be seen in the phrase “a few silver coins,” which emphasizes the cheapness of the price for which Joseph was sold, and the clause “and they were disinterested in keeping him,” which stresses the sellers’ ignorance of Joseph’s status.

Allah then states that this low price was “a few silver coins.” The term *دَرَاهِمَ* “coins” refers to whatever currency was in use at the time. Some exegetes have pointed out that the adjective *مَعْدُودَةٍ* “*ma’dūdatin*,” which means literally “countable,” means “few.” They suggest that coins were weighed when they were many but counted when there was only a few of them as they would be easy to count. It seems that the caravanners sold Joseph for a few coins because he had not cost them any money. They had not bought him as a slave, so any money they would take would have been a net profit.

Allah ends this verse by emphasizing that the caravanners’ treatment of Joseph, selling him for money, reflects their disinterest in him: “and they were disinterested in keeping him.” This underlines their ignorance of Joseph’s real status and their failure to treat him as he deserves. This emphasis on the caravanners’ ignorance of Joseph’s status is an indirect reference to Joseph’s great status in the sight of Allah.

There is a great lesson in Allah's test of Joseph, who is noble in His sight, with that temporary state of humiliation in this transient world.