

The story of Prophet Joseph (pbuh)

Continuing Prophet's stories from the Qur'an, the story of Prophet Joseph (Yusuf, peace be upon him, pbuh) is the most detailed and captivating narrative in the Qur'an. It unfolds a complete and dramatic portrayal of the human condition – jealousy, hatred, pride, passion, deception, cruelty, and fear – intertwined with the noblest of virtues: patience, loyalty, integrity, compassion, and unwavering faith in God, SWT (Sub'ānahu wa Ta'ālā = Exalted is He above all imperfections.)

The Qur'an itself introduces it as **"the best of stories"** [Qur'an 12:3], and it has been widely recognized by scholars – Muslim and non-Muslim alike – for its remarkable literary structure, eloquence, and moral depth. It stands out not only for the beauty of its expression but also for the richness of its lessons. So significant is this story that an entire chapter of the Qur'an is named after Joseph (pbuh). Surah Yusuf, Chapter 12, is one of the most compelling surahs (chapters) in the Qur'an, though every chapter holds its own beauty and wisdom.

One of the reasons for the revelation of Joseph's story was that members of the Jewish community came to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and asked him to tell them about Joseph, a prophet from among their own, the descendants of Isaac and Jacob. Over time, Joseph's, pbuh, story had become distorted in parts, with critical omissions and interpolations altering its message. In

response, Allah, SWT, revealed the full account in the Qur'an – preserved with clarity, in pure language, and filled with divine insight.

Among the many features of this chapter is that it not only recounts the life of Joseph (pbuh) but also sheds light on the character and resilience of his father, Prophet Jacob (Ya'qub, pbuh). The chapter offers a profound look at Jacob's reaction to hardship, the way he addressed his sons, and most importantly, the depth and steadfastness of his faith through times of immense grief and uncertainty.

The narrative of Prophet Joseph (pbuh) begins with a distinctive feature found in several chapters of the Qur'an – disconnected (separate or abbreviated) letters. In the case of Surah Yusuf, it opens with: Alif, Lām, Rā. While scholars throughout Islamic history have offered various interpretations for these unique letter combinations, their ultimate meaning is known only to Allah. I have my own reflections on these letters, which I may share at another time, God willing.

Immediately after these letters, the Qur'an sets the tone for the story: **"Alif, Lām, Rā. We relate to you (O Muhammad) the best of stories through Our revelation to you of this Qur'an, though before this you were among those unaware."** [Qur'an 12:1–3]

This verse not only emphasizes the excellence of Joseph's story but also underscores its divine origin and the miraculous nature



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of its revelation to a man unlettered and uninformed of prior scriptures. To reinforce the significance of divine revelation, the Qur'an also declares in another chapter: **"Thus, We relate to you (O Muhammad) some information of what happened before. And indeed, We have given you from Us a Reminder (the Qur'an). Whoever turns away from it will surely bear a heavy burden on the Day of Resurrection. They will abide in it, and wretched is that burden on the Day of Resurrection."** [Qur'an 20:99-101]

The story of Joseph (pbuh) flows seamlessly from beginning to end, its form and substance perfectly intertwined. It offers a powerful reminder of the supreme will of Allah, SWT, and the unfolding of His decrees, regardless of the intricacies and schemes of human actors. As the Qur'an powerfully asserts: **"And Allah has full power and control over His affairs, but most of mankind know not."** [Qur'an 12:21]. This verse captures the central message of Joseph's journey – a story of divine orchestration behind apparent misfortunes, culminating in a conclusion filled with comfort, wisdom, and awe.

A Story in Episodes:
The story of Prophet Jo-

seph (pbuh) unfolds in a sequence of vivid and compelling episodes. Each scene transitions seamlessly into the next, drawing the reader into a cinematic experience that is at once informative and emotionally stirring. The structure of the story allows room for imaginative engagement, with subtle narrative gaps that invite reflection and contemplation – gaps which no human author could craft with such artistic precision and spiritual depth.

Joseph's Childhood:

The story begins with a dream and ends with its fulfillment. As dawn broke and the early sunlight touched the earth, young Joseph (pbuh), son of Prophet Jacob (Ya'qub, pbuh), awoke from sleep, heartened by a vision he had seen. Filled with excitement and innocence, he rushed to share the dream with his beloved father:

"O my father! Verily, I saw (in a dream) eleven planets and the sun and the moon; I saw them prostrating to me."

[Qur'an 12:4]

Eleven Planets! Please keep this in mind. The face of Joseph's father, Jacob, lit up. Prophet Jacob (pbuh) immediately recognized that this was no ordinary dream. He saw in it the signs of divine favor and the continuation of the legacy of his father, Prophet Isaac, pbuh, and his grandfather, Prophet Abraham (Ibrahim, pbuh) – that the light of prophet-hood and divine guidance would remain alive through Joseph.

In this context, the

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was once asked: "Who is the most honorable among the people?" He replied: *"The most God-fearing."* The people clarified, "We do not mean that." He then said: *"The most honorable is Joseph, the prophet of Allah, the son of the faithful friend of Allah [Abraham]."*

Jacob (pbuh), however, knew the danger lurking beneath the surface. He understood the envy harbored by Joseph's older brothers and wisely warned his son to keep the dream to himself: **"O my son! Do not relate your vision to your brothers, lest they plot against you. Verily, Satan is to man a clear enemy. Thus will your Lord choose you, and teach you the interpretation of dreams and perfect His favor upon you and upon the descendants of Jacob, just as He perfected it upon your forefathers – Abraham and Isaac before. Indeed, your Lord is All-Knowing, All-Wise."** [Qur'an 12:5–6]

Joseph obeyed his father and kept the dream to himself. The jealousy of his brothers was so intense that even simple moments of joy or spiritual insight were unsafe to share. Their hatred was an ever-present threat, and Joseph instinctively guarded the secrets of his heart.

Description of Joseph:
The Qur'an does not mention the exact age of Joseph (peace be upon him) at the time of his dream. This omission, like many others, aligns with the Qur'an's narrative style, focusing on

the moral and spiritual lessons rather than incidental details. Similarly, none of Joseph's brothers are mentioned by name, nor are specific biographical facts about them provided. What is emphasized instead is the emotional and moral landscape that shapes the events of the story.

From the context, however, it can be inferred that both Joseph and his younger brother, Benjamin, were still children when the story began. Joseph may have been between seven and twelve years old, and Benjamin possibly a year or two younger. The Qur'an presents Joseph as respectful, gentle, and perceptive – a child whose demeanor was marked by kindness and thoughtfulness. His younger brother Benjamin was also described as pleasant and well-mannered.

Both boys were the sons of Rachel (from the bible), and their refined character distinguished them from their older siblings. It was because of these virtues – along with perhaps the natural affection one has for younger, more dependent children – that their father, Jacob (peace be upon him), loved them deeply and kept them close. His affection for Joseph and Benjamin, however, would become a source of jealousy and tension in the hearts of their older brothers, laying the groundwork for the drama to unfold.

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