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Joseph

Yūsuf

The third in a series of six *sūrahs* whose opening verses include the letters *alif*, *lām*, and *rā'* and speak of *the Book*, *Yūsuf* belongs to the Makkan period (JJ). This *sūrah* is concerned primarily with recounting the entire story of the prophet Joseph (who is also referred to in 6:84 and 40:34) and constitutes the longest and most continuous single narrative in the Quran (vv. 3–101). The general outline of Joseph's life and times accounted here corresponds to Genesis 37:1–46:7, although there are several significant differences between the Quranic and Biblical accounts. The story of Joseph is said to have been revealed to the Prophet when some Jewish scholars in Makkah had persuaded the Makkan idolaters to ask the Prophet about certain details pertaining to Joseph's life and legacy (R). According to another report, God revealed the story of Joseph to the Prophet after his Companions had asked him to provide them with a story (Ṭ).

As the *most beautiful of stories* (v. 3) begins, Joseph discloses a special dream he had to his father, Jacob, who warns Joseph not to convey his dream to his brothers (vv. 4–5), who are exceedingly jealous of him (v. 8). The brothers plot to be rid of Joseph and manage to convince Jacob to allow Joseph to go with them into the wilderness (vv. 9–14). Once left in their care, Joseph is taken into the desert by his brothers and cast into a well (v. 15). Joseph is eventually rescued by a caravan (v. 19) and purchased in Egypt by a high-ranking official (v. 21), identified with the Biblical figure Potiphar (see 12:21–22c).

While Joseph is under Potiphar's care, Potiphar's wife,

Zulaykhā (not mentioned by name), falls in love with him and attempts to seduce him, but Joseph does not succumb to her advances (vv. 23–25). After false accusations before Potiphar (v. 25) and widespread rumors throughout Egypt of what had transpired between Joseph and Zulaykhā (v. 30), Joseph is cast into prison (v. 35). Joseph is later exonerated, released from prison, and appointed to high office in Egyptian society (vv. 50–56). By the end of the tale, Joseph’s parents and brothers come to Egypt to stay with him (v. 99), and the dream he had at the beginning of the story is fulfilled (v. 100).

Perhaps more than any other Quranic narrative, the story of Joseph has supplied material for an astonishing array of artistic, literary, and spiritual works in the Islamic tradition. The figure of Joseph himself, who is said to have possessed exceptional physical beauty, is often associated in Islamic literature with the reflection of Divine Beauty, patience in times of adversity, and the art of dream interpretation. The commentaries on this *sūrah* reflect this rich tradition and incorporate into their accounts material that is often folkloric and imaginative. The incident between Joseph and Zulaykhā has formed the basis for a variety of mystical and literary romances, one of the most well known of which is a lengthy Persian poem entitled *Joseph and Zulaykhā* (*Yūsuf wa Zulaykhā*) by the famous Sufi poet^c Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (d. 898/1492). The philosopher and founder of the School of Illumination, Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191), also uses the motifs and symbols from the story of Joseph in his philosophical treatise *On the Reality of Love* (*al-Risālah fī ḥaqīqat al-^cishq*) in order to explain the metaphysical significance of love and its relation to beauty and joy on the one hand and sadness and longing on the other. Many interpret the story of Joseph symbolically and spiritually as an account of the separation of the human soul from its Divine Origin and its return to It. At the highest level of interpretation it has often been seen as an exalted love tale that speaks about the relationship between the human lover and the Divine Beloved. As al-Maybudī says in his Quran commentary, “How beautiful the story of Joseph is! It is a story of lover and beloved, a report of separation and union. [From it,] the pain-stricken one ought to read of those who are pain-stricken, and the lover ought to receive news of the pain of love and the burning desire of lovers.”

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

① *Alif. Lām. Rā.* These are the signs of the clear Book. ② Truly We sent it down as an Arabic Quran, that haply you may understand. ③ We recount unto thee the most beautiful of stories by Our having revealed unto thee this Quran, though before it thou wert among the heedless. ④ When Joseph said unto his father, “O my father, truly I have seen eleven stars, and the sun and the moon. I saw them prostrating before me.” ⑤ He said, “O my son! Recount not thy vision to thy brothers, lest they devise some scheme against thee. Surely Satan is a manifest enemy unto man. ⑥ Thus shall thy Lord choose thee, and teach thee the interpretation of events, and complete His Blessing upon thee, and upon the House of Jacob, just as He completed it upon thy forefathers, Abraham and Isaac. Truly thy Lord is Knowing, Wise.” ⑦ Certainly in Joseph and his brothers there are signs for the inquiring. ⑧ [Remember] when they said, “Truly Joseph and his brother are more beloved unto our father than are we, though we are a group. Surely our father is in manifest error! ⑨ Slay Joseph, or cast him out to some land, that your father’s concern might be for you. And be, thereafter, a righteous people.” ⑩ One among them said, “Slay not Joseph, but cast him into the depths of the well, that some caravan might pick him up, if you would take some action.” ⑪ They said, “O father! What ails thee that thou dost not trust us with Joseph? Truly we wish him well. ⑫ Send him forth with us tomorrow, to frolic and play. We shall surely be his

keepers.” 13 He said, “Truly it grieves me that you should go with him. And I fear that the wolf may eat him, while you are heedless of him.” 14 They said, “If the wolf should eat him, while we are a group, then we would surely be losers!” 15 So when they went with him, and agreed to put him in the depths of the well, We revealed unto him, “Verily thou wilt inform them of this affair of theirs, when they are unaware.” 16 And in the evening they came weeping unto their father. 17 They said, “O father! We went racing with one another, and left Joseph with our things, and the wolf ate him. But thou wouldst not believe us, even if we were truthful.” 18 And they brought forth his shirt with false blood. He said, “Nay, your souls have seduced you in this matter. Beautiful patience! And God is the One Whose help is sought against that which you describe.” 19 And then a caravan came along and sent their water carrier, and he let down his bucket. He said, “Good news! Here is a boy!” So they hid him as merchandise. And God knew well what they were doing. 20 And they sold him for a low price, a number of dirhams, for they valued him not. 21 The man from Egypt who bought him said unto his wife, “Give him honorable accommodation. It may be that he will bring us some benefit, or that we may take him as a son.” And thus did We establish Joseph in the land, that We might teach him the interpretation of events. And God prevails over His affair, but most of mankind know not. 22 When he reached his maturity, We gave him wisdom and knowledge. Thus do We recompense the virtuous. 23 But she in whose house he was staying sought

to lure him from himself. She locked the doors and said, “Come, thou!” He said, “God be my refuge! Truly He is my lord, and has made beautiful my accommodation. Verily the wrongdoers will not prosper!” ²⁴ She indeed inclined toward him, and he would have inclined toward her, had he not seen the proof of his Lord. Thus it was, that We might turn him away from evil and indecency. Truly he was among Our sincere servants. ²⁵ And they raced to the door, while she tore his shirt from behind. And they encountered her master at the door. She said, “What is the recompense for one who desires ill toward thy wife, save that he be imprisoned, or a painful punishment?” ²⁶ He said, “It was she who sought to lure me from myself.” And a witness from her own people testified, “If his shirt is torn from the front, then she has spoken the truth and he is among the liars. ²⁷ But if his shirt is torn from behind, then she has lied and he is among the truthful.” ²⁸ So when he saw that his shirt was torn from behind, he said, “Verily this is among the schemes of you women—your scheming is great indeed! ²⁹ Joseph, turn away from this. And you, seek forgiveness for your sin. Truly you were among those at fault.” ³⁰ Some women of the city said, “The viceroy’s wife sought to lure her slave boy from himself! He has filled her with ardent love. Truly we consider her to be in manifest error.” ³¹ So when she heard of their plotting, she sent for them, and prepared a repast for them, and gave each of them a knife. And she said [to Joseph], “Come out before them!” Then when they saw him, they so admired him that they cut their hands and said, “God be praised!

This is no human being. This is naught but a noble angel!”

32 She said, “This is the one on whose account you blamed me. I indeed sought to lure him from himself, but he remained chaste. And if he does not do as I command, he shall surely be imprisoned; and he shall be among those humbled.”

33 He said, “My Lord! Prison is dearer to me than that to which they call me. If Thou dost not turn their scheming away from me, I shall incline toward them and be among the ignorant.”

34 So his Lord answered him, and turned their scheming away from him. Truly He is the Hearing, the Knowing.

35 Then it occurred to them, after they had seen the signs, that they should imprison him for a time.

36 Now two young men entered the prison with him. One of them said, “Truly I see myself [in a dream] pressing wine.” The other said, “Truly I see myself [in a dream] carrying bread atop my head, from which the birds eat.” “Inform us of its interpretation. Truly we see you as being among the virtuous.”

37 He said, “No food with which you are provided will come unto you, save that I shall inform you of its interpretation before it comes. This is among the things my Lord has taught me. I forsake the creed of a people who believe not in God, and they who are disbelievers in the Hereafter.”

38 And I follow the creed of my fathers, Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob. It is not for us to ascribe any partners unto God. That is from the bounty God has bestowed upon us and upon mankind, but most of mankind do not give thanks.

39 O my fellow prisoners! Are diverse lords better, or God, the One, the Paramount?

40 You worship apart from Him naught but names that you

have named—you and your fathers—for which God has sent down no authority. Judgment belongs to God alone. He commands that you worship none but Him. That is the upright religion, but most of mankind know not. ⁴¹ O my fellow prisoners! As for one of you, he shall serve wine to his lord. But as for the other, he shall be crucified, and the birds will eat from his head. The matter about which you inquired has been decreed.” ⁴² And he said to the one of them whom he knew would be saved, “Mention me to your lord.” But Satan caused him to forget to make mention to his lord. So he remained in prison for several years. ⁴³ And the king said, “Verily I see [in a dream] seven fat cows being eaten by seven lean ones; and seven green heads of grain, and others dry. O notables! Give me your opinion on my vision, if you can interpret visions.” ⁴⁴ They said, “What confused dreams! And we are not experts in the interpretation of dreams!” ⁴⁵ Now the one who had been saved among the two said, remembering after a while, “I shall inform you of its interpretation, so send me forth.” ⁴⁶ “Joseph, O truthful one! Give us thine opinion concerning seven fat cows being eaten by seven lean ones, and seven green heads of grain, and others dry, that haply I may return to the people, that they might know.” ⁴⁷ He said, “You will sow diligently for seven years. Then whatever you harvest, leave in its ear, save a little that you eat. ⁴⁸ Then after this will come seven hard [years] which will devour that which you have saved in advance for them, save a little of that which you have stored. ⁴⁹ Then after this will come a year wherein people will be granted succor, and wherein they

will press [wine and oil].” 50 The king said, “Bring him to me!” So when the messenger came to him he said, “Return to your lord and ask him, ‘What of the women who cut their hands? Surely my Lord knows well their scheming!’”

51 He said, “What was your purpose when you sought to lure Joseph from himself?” They said, “God be praised! We know no evil against him.” The viceroy’s wife said, “Now the truth has come to light. It was I who sought to lure him from himself, and verily he is among the truthful.” 52 “This is so, that he may know that I betrayed him not in his absence. Truly God guides not the scheming of the treacherous. 53 But I absolve not my own soul. Surely the soul commands to evil, save whom my Lord may show mercy. Truly my Lord is Forgiving, Merciful.” 54 And the king said, “Bring him to me, that I might reserve him exclusively for myself.” Then when he had spoken with him, he said, “Truly this day thou shalt be of high rank and trusted in our presence.” 55 He said, “Set me over the storehouses of the land. Truly I am a skilled keeper.” 56 Thus did We establish Joseph in the land, that there he might settle wheresoever he will. We cause Our Mercy to fall upon whomsoever We will, and We neglect not the reward of the virtuous. 57 And the reward of the Hereafter is better for those who believe and are reverent. 58 The brothers of Joseph came and entered upon him, and he recognized them, while they knew him not. 59 And when he had arranged for their provisions, he said, “Bring me a brother of yours from your father. Do you not see that I give full measure, and that I am the best of hosts? 60 But if

you bring him not unto me, you shall have no measure from me, nor shall you come nigh unto me.” ⁶¹ They said, “We shall seek to lure him from his father; that we shall surely do.” ⁶² He said to his servant boys, “Put their merchandise in their saddlebags. Perchance they will recognize it when they have gone back to their people; perchance they will return.” ⁶³ So when they returned to their father, they said, “O father! The measure has been withheld from us. So send our brother with us that we might obtain the measure. We shall surely be his keepers.” ⁶⁴ He said, “Should I entrust him to you as I entrusted his brother to you aforetime? But God is the best of keepers, and He is the most Merciful of the merciful.” ⁶⁵ And when they opened their belongings, they found their merchandise had been returned to them. They said, “O father! What [more] do we seek? This is our merchandise returned unto us! Now we can provide for our family, and keep watch over our brother, while getting another camel-load—these are meager rations!” ⁶⁶ He said, “I will not send him forth with you till you give me a solemn pledge before God that you will surely bring him back to me, unless you are surrounded.” So when they gave their solemn pledge, he said, “God is Guardian over what we say.” ⁶⁷ And he said, “O my sons! Enter not by one gate, but enter by separate gates. Yet, I cannot avail you aught against God. Judgment belongs to God alone. I trust in Him; and let those who trust, trust in Him.” ⁶⁸ And when they entered whence their father had commanded them, it did not avail them aught against God, but it fulfilled a need in Jacob’s soul. Truly he was possessed of

knowledge because of that which We taught him, but most of mankind know not. ⁶⁹ And when they entered upon Joseph, he drew his brother close to himself and said, “Truly I am your brother; so be not distressed on account of that which they used to do.” ⁷⁰ And when he had made ready their provisions, he put the drinking cup into his brother’s saddlebag. Then a herald cried out, “O you men of the caravan! Truly you are thieves!” ⁷¹ Turning toward them, they said, “What are you missing?” ⁷² They said, “We are missing the goblet of the king.” “For whosoever brings it forth, there shall be a camel-load. I shall be its guarantor.” ⁷³ They said, “By God, you certainly know that we came not to work corruption in the land, and we are not thieves.” ⁷⁴ They said, “And what will be the recompense for it if you be liars?” ⁷⁵ They said, “Its recompense will be that he in whose saddlebag it is found—he himself shall be its recompense. Thus do we recompense the wrongdoers.” ⁷⁶ Then he began with their baggage, before the baggage of his brother. Then he removed it from his brother’s baggage. Thus did We devise a scheme for Joseph. Under the king’s law, he could not have taken his brother unless God willed. We raise in degrees whomsoever We will, and above every possessor of knowledge is a knower. ⁷⁷ They said, “If he has stolen, a brother of his had stolen aforetime.” But Joseph kept it secret in his soul and disclosed it not unto them. He said, “You are in a worse position! And God knows best concerning that which you describe.” ⁷⁸ They said, “O viceroy! He has a venerable, aged father; so take one of us

in his place. Truly we see you as being among the virtuous.” ⁷⁹ He said, “God be my refuge that we should take any save the one with whom we found our property! For then we would surely be wrongdoers.” ⁸⁰ So when they despaired of [swaying] him, they conferred privately. The eldest of them said, “Do you not know that your father has taken a solemn pledge from you before God, and earlier you neglected Joseph? Thus I shall not depart from this land till my father grants me leave, or God renders judgment upon me, and He is the best of judges!” ⁸¹ Return unto your father and say, ‘O father! Verily your son has committed theft. And we bore witness to that which we knew, but we are not keepers of the unseen.’ ⁸² So ask the town wherein we were, and the caravan with which we approached. Verily we are truthful.” ⁸³ He said, “Nay, your souls have seduced you in this matter. Beautiful patience! It may be that God will bring them to me all together. Truly He is the Knowing, the Wise.” ⁸⁴ And he turned away from them and said, “Oh, how great is my grief for Joseph!” His eyes had turned white with grief, and he was choked with anguish. ⁸⁵ They said, “By God, wilt thou go on remembering Joseph till thou art ill to the point of death, or till thou hast perished?” ⁸⁶ He said, “I complain of my sorrow and grief to God alone. And I know from God that which you know not.” ⁸⁷ O my sons! Go and inquire about Joseph and his brother and despair not of God’s Comfort; truly none despairs of God’s Comfort save the disbelieving people.” ⁸⁸ So when they entered upon him they said, “O viceroy! Affliction has befallen us and our

people. We bring but meager merchandise; yet grant us full measure and be charitable unto us. Truly God shall recompense the charitable.” 89 He said, “Do you know what you have done with Joseph and his brother, when you were ignorant?” 90 They said, “Art thou indeed Joseph?” He said, “I am Joseph and this is my brother. God has been gracious unto us. Verily whosoever is reverent and patient—surely God neglects not the reward of the virtuous.” 91 “By God!” they said, “God has preferred thee over us, and we were at fault.” 92 He said, “There is no reproach against you this day. God will forgive you. And He is the most Merciful of the merciful.” 93 Take this shirt of mine and cast it upon my father’s face; he will come to see. And bring me your family, all together.” 94 And as the caravan set off, their father said, “Truly I sense the scent of Joseph, if you think me not senile!” 95 They said, “By God! Truly thou art astray as of old.” 96 And when the bearer of glad tidings came, he cast it upon his face and he was restored to sight. He said, “Did I not say unto you that I know from God that which you know not?” 97 They said, “O father! Seek forgiveness for us from our sins. Truly we were at fault.” 98 He said, “I shall indeed seek forgiveness for you from my Lord. Truly He is Forgiving, Merciful.” 99 So when they entered upon Joseph, he drew his parents close to himself and said, “Enter Egypt in security, if God wills!” 100 And he raised his parents up to the throne, and they [all] fell prostrate toward him. He said, “O my father! This is the fulfillment of my vision; my Lord has made it come true. He was good to me when He brought me forth from prison,

and brought thee from the desert, after Satan incited evil between my brothers and me. Indeed, my Lord is Subtle in that which He wills. Truly He is the Knower, the Wise. ⁽¹⁰¹⁾ My Lord! Thou hast given me something of sovereignty, and taught me the interpretation of events. Originator of the heavens and the earth! Thou art my Protector in this world and in the Hereafter! Take me as a submitter unto Thyself, and admit me to the company of the righteous.” ⁽¹⁰²⁾ These are among the accounts of the unseen which We reveal unto thee. And thou wert not with them when they decided upon their affair and plotted. ⁽¹⁰³⁾ And most of mankind, however much thou mightest desire, are not believers. ⁽¹⁰⁴⁾ And thou askest of them no reward for it; it is naught but a reminder for the worlds. ⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ How many a sign is there in the heavens and on the earth by which they pass; yet they turn away from them! ⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ And most of them believe not in God, save that they ascribe partners unto Him. ⁽¹⁰⁷⁾ Do they feel secure from the coming of an overwhelming punishment from God upon them? Or from the coming of the Hour suddenly, while they are unaware? ⁽¹⁰⁸⁾ Say, “This is my way. I call unto God with clear sight—I, and those who follow me. Glory be to God! And I am not among those who ascribe partners unto God.” ⁽¹⁰⁹⁾ And We sent none before thee, save men unto whom We sent revelation among the people of the towns. Have they not journeyed upon the earth and observed how those before them fared in the end? And the Abode of the Hereafter is better for those who are reverent. Do you not understand? ⁽¹¹⁰⁾ Till, when the messengers despaired and thought that they were

deemed liars, Our Help came unto them, and whosoever We willed was saved. And Our Might shall not be turned back from the guilty people. ﴿١١١﴾ Certainly in their stories is a lesson for those possessed of intellect. It is not a fabricated account; rather, it is a confirmation of that which came before it, and an elaboration of all things, and a guidance and a mercy for a people who believe.

Commentary

﴿١﴾ *Alif. Lām. Rā.* These are the signs of the clear Book.

1 The Arabic letters *alif*, *lām*, and *rāʾ*, which also appear in 10:1; 11:1; 13:1; 14:1; and 15:1, are among the separated letters (*al-muqattaʿāt*) that are found at the beginning of twenty-nine *sūrah*s and whose ultimate meaning, most commentators maintain, is known only to God; see 2:1c. *The clear Book* refers to the Quran (K1, Q) and its ability to make the truth manifest (K1; for identical verses, see 26:2; 28:2; see also 43:2; 44:2). Alternately, *the clear Book* could be a reference to the *Preserved Tablet* (see 85:22c; Ṭb). See also 10:1c, where the adjective *wise* is understood to be a reference to the Book's being *clear*.

﴿٢﴾ Truly We sent it down as an Arabic Quran, that haply you may understand.

2 For *Arabic Quran*, see also 20:113; 39:28c; 41:3c; 42:7. Cf. 43:3.

﴿٣﴾ We recount unto thee the most beautiful of stories by Our having revealed unto thee this Quran, though before it thou wert among the heedless.

3 In 39:23, the Quran is described as *the most beautiful discourse*, part of which is the story of Joseph, to which reference is made here as *the most beautiful of stories*. This narrative is described this way because it is understood to bring together all of the truths that pertain to one's religious life as well as one's worldly affairs (Q). On the one hand, it speaks about such matters as the Oneness of God the nature of prophets, angels, saints, righteous people, evil people, people who have knowledge, and people who are ignorant; dream interpretation; forgiveness; and Divine Love. On the other hand, it speaks about kingship, earthly trials and punishments, human love, travel, business transactions, social etiquette, politics, and human deception (Aj, My, Q). *Beautiful* could refer to the beauty of the story's language and eloquence as well as its content (R). *Thou wert among the heedless* means that the Prophet had no knowledge of this story before the revelation of this *sūrah* (Kl, N, R).

④ When Joseph said unto his father, “O my father, truly I have seen eleven stars, and the sun and the moon. I saw them prostrating before me.”

4 Joseph's father was Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham—all of whom were prophets; for the Abrahamic line of prophets, see 6:84c. It is widely accepted that the vision Joseph had was a true dream (Aj, R, Ṭ, Ṭs), which in Islamic tradition is bestowed not only upon prophets, but also upon ordinary human beings. True dreams are distinguished from common dreams in that they convey a truth from another level of reality or represent a manifestation of the spirit in the imaginal world (see also 12:6c). Some commentators observe that the dreams of prophets are a form of Divine Revelation (Ṭ). However, others situate the beginning of Joseph's prophetic mission at a slightly later period (see 12:15c), in which case this vision could be seen as a portent of his impending prophetic function, as was the case with the Prophet Muhammad (see the introduction to *Sūrah* 96).

The *eleven stars* are understood to represent Joseph's eleven brothers (Bg, Q, Ṭ, Ṭs); *the sun* represents his father and *the moon* his mother (R), or vice versa (Q, Ṭ). The prostration of these heavenly bodies before Joseph is said to have been interpreted by Jacob to mean that a great calamity would soon befall his son (cf. Genesis 37:10), based upon a belief that a created being does not prostrate before another created being, except that the one to whom prostration is made will undergo a severe trial, such as when the angels bowed down before Adam, who was soon thereafter expelled from Paradise (Aj); for the fall of Adam, see 2:35c. Al-Rāzī

interprets the prostration of the heavenly bodies before Joseph as symbolizing Joseph's brothers, father, and mother eventually coming under his care. For the fulfillment of this dream, see 12:100c.

⑤ He said, "O my son! Recount not thy vision to thy brothers, lest they devise some scheme against thee. Surely Satan is a manifest enemy unto man.

5 Jacob told Joseph not to relate his dream to his brothers because he feared their jealousy of him, as he knew that the dream meant that Joseph would not only experience tribulations, but would also attain an exalted position (Kl). Some say that Jacob understood Joseph's dream to mean that God had chosen him for prophethood and thus feared that Joseph would suffer on account of his brothers' jealousy and oppression (Bđ). According to one account, because of the innocence of his young age, Joseph did relate his vision to his brothers (Q; see v. 8); cf. Genesis 37:5, 9–10. For Satan as a *manifest enemy*, see, for example, 2:168, 208; 6:142; 7:22.

⑥ Thus shall thy Lord choose thee, and teach thee the interpretation of events, and complete His Blessing upon thee, and upon the House of Jacob, just as He completed it upon thy forefathers, Abraham and Isaac. Truly thy Lord is Knowing, Wise."

6 *Thus shall thy Lord choose thee* means that, just as God had chosen Joseph to have such an exalted vision, so too would He choose him to accomplish great tasks (R), which some understand to be a reference to the function of prophethood (Bđ, Q). *The interpretation of events* refers to the ability to interpret dreams (see also v. 21 and v. 44c). In traditional Islamic psychology, this art entails knowing the source of dreams. True dreams are said to come from an angelic source, whereas false dreams come from the lower self or a demonic force (Bđ); regarding Joseph's interpretation of dreams, see vv. 37, 41, 47–49. *The interpretation of events* can also refer to the ability to discern the hidden meanings within scripture

(see 3:7c; Bđ). More generally, it can refer to the gift of being able to discern the true nature of things.

God's completing *His Blessing upon Joseph and upon the House of Jacob* (see also 19:6) can refer to the blessing of prophethood (Bđ, R), in which case *just as He completed it upon thy forefathers, Abraham and Isaac* refers to their prophethood. Alternately, God's *Blessing upon Joseph and the House of Jacob* can refer to the combination of blessings they will receive in this world and the next (Bđ). In this case, God's *Blessing on the forefathers Abraham and Isaac* would refer to (1) the fact that Abraham was taken by God as a friend (see 4:125) and saved from the fire into which his people had cast him (see 21:69; 37:97); and (2) the fact that Isaac obeyed Abraham's request to be his sacrifice and then was ransomed by the replacement of a ram at God's Command (Bđ; see the commentary on 37:102–7).

⑦ Certainly in Joseph and his brothers there are signs for the inquiring.

7 In the account of Joseph and his eleven brothers there are *signs*, meaning lessons (IJ), for those who wish to gain true knowledge and learn the universal import of the story of Joseph (Bđ, JJ). One of the moral lessons of this narrative is the ultimate futility of envy, which motivated Joseph's brothers and led the Prophet Muhammad's own kin to reject him and cause him harm. Yet, both Muhammad and Joseph were assisted by God, and their enemies ended up under their authority (R). The Prophet is reported to have said, "Beware of envy, for it consumes good deeds as fire consumes wood."

The story of Joseph also contains *signs* for those seeking an answer to their existential situation, counseling them to have patience in times of tribulation on the one hand, and to have gratitude for God's blessings on the other (Qu). Moreover, the story shows many of the ways God gently takes care of His friends through His protection of them. It also contains signs that demonstrate that God's Love is realized through trial and tribulation (Qu).

⑧ [Remember] when they said, "Truly Joseph and his brother are more beloved unto our father than are we, though we are a group. Surely our father is in manifest

error!

8 *His brother* refers to Benjamin, Jacob's youngest son and Joseph's only full brother (JJ, Kl, Ts). Since at the beginning of the account Joseph and Benjamin were so young, Jacob was particularly kind toward them and kept them closer to him than he did their brothers, but the other brothers could not bear this distinction and felt envious (Ts). *A group* translates *‘uṣbah*, which conveys the sense of a large group of people usually understood to range from ten to forty in number (Bg, Kl). *Though we are a group* can thus be read as an expression of shock or astonishment, for the brothers thought that, as a larger or more powerful group, they had more right to their father's love than his two younger children (Bd, Z). In tribal cultures, having many sons to help with work and to defend the family and tribe was a reason for valuing them. According to this logic, having many grown sons would thus be more valuable than having two young ones, since the latter would not suffice as defenders of their father or as powerful bearers of his legacy. With respect to Joseph in particular, it is said that Jacob loved him so much that he would keep Joseph with him night and day, never parting company (Aj). Joseph's brothers initially envied him because Jacob preferred him, but their envy became more intense after they learned of Joseph's dream (see 12:5c; Ts).

9 Slay Joseph, or cast him out to some land, that your father's concern might be for you. And be, thereafter, a righteous people."

9 The brothers believed that slaying or banishing Joseph *to some land* would remove him from Jacob's attention and cause Jacob to eventually set his heart on them instead (My), meaning that his *concern* would then be for them alone. *And be, thereafter, a righteous people* means that the brothers intended to repent later to God for their transgression against Joseph (JJ, Z), and to be upright thereafter (Kl) or that, after they had disposed of Joseph, they would seek to mend their relationship with their father (Kl, Z).

10 One among them said, "Slay not Joseph, but cast him into the depths of the well, that some caravan might pick

him up, if you would take some action.”

10 *One among them* is a reference to their oldest brother (IK), who is not identified in the Quran but whose action resembles that of either Judah (R) or Reuben (cf. Genesis 37:22–28; Bd, IK, Ṭū). According to the majority of commentators, the suggestion to *cast him into the depths of the well, that some caravan might pick him up* did not meet with the brothers’ approval until later; see 12:15c.

11 They said, “O father! What ails thee that thou dost not trust us with Joseph? Truly we wish him well.

12 Send him forth with us tomorrow, to frolic and play. We shall surely be his keepers.”

11–12 The brothers’ question is an indication that Jacob feared what they would do to Joseph (R) and that they had previously asked Jacob to allow Joseph to go with them, but that he had refused their request (Q). If so, then the suggestion to throw Joseph into the well mentioned in v. 10 was perhaps one of several other plans that they had made to dispose of him. By saying *Truly we wish him well*, the brothers made it appear to Jacob that they had a great deal of love and compassion for Joseph (R), implying that they did not intend to harm him. It was the brothers’ custom to go to the pasture and spend some time there in leisure (R). Thus, their request that Jacob allow Joseph to go with them so that he can *frolic and play* was the perfect pretext for them to carry out their plan. The expression *we shall surely be his keepers* is also employed by the brothers in v. 63, where they attempt to convince Jacob that nothing would happen to Benjamin if he were to send him along with them; see v. 64 for Jacob’s response.

13 He said, “Truly it grieves me that you should go with him. And I fear that the wolf may eat him, while you are heedless of him.”

14 They said, “If the wolf should eat him, while we are a group, then we would surely be losers!”

13–14 Jacob was saddened by the possibility of being separated from Joseph for even an hour (N) on account of his intense love for him (see 12:8c). From a spiritual perspective, just as Jacob could not be without his beloved for even an hour, so should believers not be forgetful of their Divine Beloved for even a moment, since heedlessness of God is separation, while remembrance of Him is togetherness (Aj).

Some commentators relate an account of a dream that Jacob had in which he was at the top of a mountain and Joseph was in a valley, when suddenly ten wolves encircled Joseph in order to devour him. But one of the wolves left him, at which time the ground was rent asunder and Joseph remained concealed underground for three days. According to this account, the wolves represent the brothers; the one wolf who left Joseph represents Judah or Reuben, who convinced the others not to kill him; and the crack in the ground represents the well into which the brothers resolved to cast Joseph (see v. 10). Thus, by speaking of the wolf devouring Joseph, Jacob was referring to the ten brothers (Q), who, like wolves, would act deceptively in devouring their prey. Others, however, say that since wolves were generally the most feared creatures in the pastures, Jacob was referring to an actual wolf (Q), and even a specific wolf, as the definite article *the* in *the wolf* indicates (see also 12:16–17c). The brothers’ response is understood to be an oath or a promise that nothing would happen to Joseph (JJ).

15 So when they went with him, and agreed to put him in the depths of the well, We revealed unto him, “Verily thou wilt inform them of this affair of theirs, when they are unaware.”

15 *So when they went with him* implies that the brothers had been given permission by Jacob to take Joseph with them (IH, IJ, R); cf. Genesis 37:13, where it is Jacob who sends Joseph to the brothers. According to one account, when Jacob sent Joseph with his brothers, he took a solemn pledge from them that they would protect him (cf. v. 66). Reuben (in this account) agreed to this, and then Jacob said to him, “O Reuben, he is little. And you know, O my son, my compassion for him. If he is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, quench his thirst. If he is tired, carry him, and

then quickly bring him back to me” (Q).

When they *agreed to put him in the depths of the well* refers to both the plan and its implementation (IH, JJ, Q, R). Thus, between the words *they went with him* and *agreed to put him in the depths of the well* a sequence of events took place that is not mentioned in the Quran, but that accounts for the period between Joseph’s departure with his brothers and his time in the well.

Commentators describe this extra-Quranic sequence of events as follows. When the brothers left with Joseph, they took turns carrying him upon their shoulders, and Jacob saw all of them off. Once they were out of Jacob’s sight, the brother upon whose shoulders Joseph was sitting threw him down on the ground, almost breaking some of his limbs (Q). Joseph then sought his other brothers’ help, but to no avail, since each brother to whom he went took his turn at striking him (R). It is said he was beaten so severely that he was on the brink of death (R, Ṭ). One common narrative in the commentaries suggests that the brothers had previously promised Judah or Reuben (the eldest brother in some versions) that they would at least not kill Joseph (see 12:10c). When they were about to kill Joseph, this eldest brother interceded and reminded them of their promise (R, Ṭ). It was then that they decided *to put him in the depths of the well*.

According to another account, when Joseph sought one brother’s help as his other brothers were attacking him, this brother was moved to compassion for him and thus interceded with the brothers, telling them to return Joseph to Jacob and not to kill him. Upon hearing this, the other brothers accused the one brother of being opportunistic, only seeking to save Joseph in order to gain status in Jacob’s eyes. They then threatened to kill him along with Joseph if he chose to help him. So this brother convinced them that they should throw Joseph into a well rather than kill him (cf. Genesis 37:26–27, where he convinces the brothers to sell Joseph), since by throwing him into the well Joseph would possibly die, in which case the physical stain of his blood would not be on their hands, or he would eventually be taken off by a caravan, which would at least ensure that he would be taken far away from them (Q).

The brothers took Joseph to the well and tied him up with a rope (IK). It is said that the well was very deep, spacious at the bottom, with a narrow hole at the top (IH). They then began to lower Joseph into the well. When he attempted to cling to one of the brothers as they were lowering him, the brother struck him and reviled him; and when Joseph attempted to save himself by grasping the edge of the well, the brothers hit his hands in order to loosen his grip (IK). The brothers also tied up Joseph’s hands and tore off his shirt. Then Joseph cried out, “My brothers, return the shirt to me—I will cover myself with it in the well!” to which his brothers sarcastically responded, “Call the sun, the moon, and the eleven stars [cf. v. 2] to comfort you!” (Ṭ, Ṭs). When Joseph was halfway down the well, the brothers cut the rope. He fell into the water at the bottom of the well, and the water covered him

completely. In order to save himself, Joseph grabbed hold of a rock in the middle of the well and stood up on it (IK).

When Joseph was in the well, God *revealed unto him*, through the medium of an angel or through inspiration (*ilhām*; K1), that he would *inform them of this affair of theirs, when they are unaware*. Some commentators have said that this was the very moment in which Joseph became a prophet (Q, Ṭs), as he had received a revelation from God. The commentators agree that these words revealed to Joseph were a foretelling of the future. They were intended to give him solace in a difficult situation (JJ), and to strengthen his heart with the firm knowledge that he would eventually be freed from his current state of trial and that his brothers would one day fall under his authority (R).

When they are unaware can also be read to mean “while they are unaware,” in which case these words would not be a part of God’s direct address to Joseph about a future event, but would instead be a reference within the verse to the actual situation in which Joseph found himself in the well (Bd): God was revealing to him something of which his brothers were unaware. Al-Rāzī observes that the wisdom in concealing this revelation from Joseph’s brothers was that, had they known that Joseph was a prophet, their jealousy would have been greater, and they would surely have killed him. Al-Bayḍāwī notes that *when they are unaware* is a foreshadowing of v. 58, where Joseph meets his brothers and recognizes them, but they do not recognize him. This reading accords with the sequence of events that follow v. 58, where Joseph knows the identity of his brothers and eventually informs them of their wrongdoing (see vv. 58–90).

Many commentators also transmit popular folkloric details surrounding the story of Joseph. For example, the water of the well was bitter, but when Joseph went into the well, its water became sweet (My, R); and the well itself, which was previously dark, was now illuminated (My). We are also told that the only thing Joseph was wearing when he was in the well was an amulet (*ta^cwīdh*) that contained a shirt made from the silk of Paradise. Gabriel had originally brought this shirt to Abraham when he was thrown into the fire by his people (see 21:69; 37:97), who then bequeathed it to his son Isaac, who bequeathed it to his son Jacob. When Joseph was old enough, Jacob tied it around his neck. While Joseph was in the well, Gabriel came to him, opened the amulet, and put the shirt on him (My, R, Ṭs).

16 And in the evening they came weeping unto their father.

17 They said, “O father! We went racing with one another,

and left Joseph with our things, and the wolf ate him. But thou wouldst not believe us, even if we were truthful.”

16–17 When the brothers came in *weeping*, Jacob became worried and asked them if anything had happened to their sheep that were out in the pasture (Bg, Q, Ṭ). Commenting on the brothers’ false tears, al-Qushayrī notes that it was their hypocrisy that allowed them to lie in such a blatant manner, saying that when people become total hypocrites, they can control their eyes to the point that they can cry at will. In responding to Jacob’s question, the brothers said that nothing had happened to their sheep, which consequently led Jacob to ask, “What happened to you then, and where is Joseph?” (Bg). They then put forward their lie: they *went racing with one another* in order to train themselves so that they could combat enemies and the wolf, which had been snatching away their sheep (R); they had left Joseph with their *things*, namely, their garments and clothes (Bg). Upon hearing the news of Joseph’s death, Jacob fainted, and the brothers poured water over him to wake him up. Yet he remained unconscious until early the next morning (Q). The brothers told Jacob that they would be unable to convince him *even if* they were speaking the truth, because they felt Jacob had a bad opinion of them (Bd); cf. Genesis 37:33, where Jacob believes their account. From Jacob’s perspective, he could not believe them, because he was suspicious of them to begin with (R), which is why the brothers themselves asked him in v. 11, *What ails thee that thou dost not trust us with Joseph?* (see 12:11–12c). This mistrust of the brothers foreshadows an incident later in this *sūrah* in which the brothers return to Jacob with some news about which they were actually being truthful; yet he still does not believe them, and they themselves become veiled from the truth of what was happening in large part due to their own actions (see vv. 81–83); see also 12:5c; 12:18c.

18 And they brought forth his shirt with false blood. He said, “Nay, your souls have seduced you in this matter. Beautiful patience! And God is the One Whose help is sought against that which you describe.”

18 The brothers had Joseph’s shirt from the moment they had torn it off him before they cast him into the well (see 12:15c); cf. Genesis 37:3, which says that Jacob loved Joseph so much that he made him “a long robe with sleeves” or “a coat

of many colors.” Before returning to Jacob at night, they spattered *false blood* on the shirt from either a baby goat or a lamb that the brothers slaughtered for this purpose (IT; cf. Genesis 37:31, where it is the blood of a goat). Jacob’s response, *Nay, your souls have seduced you*, indicates that they had convinced themselves that their actions were not grievous (Aj), but that he did not believe them (Tb). Jacob also asked his sons why the shirt did not evince any signs that a predator had attacked Joseph, since if a wolf had devoured Joseph, his shirt would have been completely torn apart by the wolf (IT, T).

Upon hearing the brothers’ blatant lie and seeing their false evidence, Jacob exclaimed, *Beautiful patience!* which refers to a kind of patience that causes one not to complain to anyone but God; see v. 86 and 70:5c. Some interpret it to mean, “[My patience is/will be] a beautiful patience” (T). Thus, *Beautiful patience!* is an expression used at times of extreme grief to find solace in the fact that patience will triumph in the end and that the difficulty will eventually pass. *God is the One Whose help is sought against that which you describe* means that Jacob seeks God’s Help in bearing the lie that his sons were telling him concerning Joseph’s death (Aj); for an almost identical statement, see 21:112. Cf. v. 83. Jacob’s words regarding the brothers’ souls and his own patience are repeated in v. 83.

19 And then a caravan came along and sent their water carrier, and he let down his bucket. He said, “Good news! Here is a boy!” So they hid him as merchandise. And God knew well what they were doing.

20 And they sold him for a low price, a number of dirhams, for they valued him not.

19–20 Tradition records that Joseph had been in the well for three days when a caravan came from Midian on its way to Egypt (IK), a caravan that was lost and had come across the well fortuitously (Bg, My). The people in the caravan alighted near the well *and sent their water carrier* to take water from it. When *he let down his bucket*, Joseph clung to its rope and came out of the well (Bg). They presented Joseph *as merchandise* (T); that is, they said he was being taken as a slave. Joseph complied out of fear that they would kill him if he went against their wishes (JJ). They went on to sell Joseph in Egypt (Bg, IK) *for a low price*, which is understood by some to signify that he was a free person who had been taken unlawfully as a

slave (R): *low price* also signifies that any price would be “low.” *They valued him not* means they did not place much importance on him, considering him only “scavenged goods,” or that they did not desire to keep him out of fear that Joseph’s rightful owner (as they imagined) would come and lay claim to him (R).

21 The man from Egypt who bought him said unto his wife, “Give him honorable accommodation. It may be that he will bring us some benefit, or that we may take him as a son.” And thus did We establish Joseph in the land, that We might teach him the interpretation of events. And God prevails over His affair, but most of mankind know not.

22 When he reached his maturity, We gave him wisdom and knowledge. Thus do We recompense the virtuous.

21–22 As in the Bible (Genesis 39:1), *the man from Egypt who bought Joseph* is identified by the commentators as Potiphar (Qıfır or İfır), referred to in the Quran by the title *al-‘Azīz*, rendered in this *sūrah* as *viceroy* (a term used for anyone occupying a high-ranking position; see vv. 30, 51, 78, 88; Ṭs) and sometimes identified by commentators (as in Genesis 37:36) as the captain of Pharaoh’s guard (Ṭs). *‘Azīz* can also mean “king” (IK, Ṭ), but, moreover, it denotes someone or something that is grand, powerful, cherished, or honorable; hence it can refer to a lofty or important position. Since this *sūrah* also speaks of a *king* (vv. 43, 50, 54, 76), *‘azīz* would denote a powerful official, which is what Potiphar was and what Joseph would become. Other Islamic sources state that Potiphar oversaw the treasury of Egypt (Aj, R, Ṭs, Z), which perhaps derives from the fact that when Joseph is later called *al-‘Azīz*, his role is as keeper of the storehouses of the kingdom (see vv. 78, 88). The name of *his wife* in Islamic sources is sometimes given as Rā‘īl or, more commonly, Zulaykhā (AJ, R, Ṭs), although she is not named in the Quran. It is said that Potiphar purchased Joseph in the marketplace (Kl), after he had been struck by Joseph’s inner beauty (My). He then instructed Zulaykhā to give Joseph *honorable accommodation*, in other words, to arrange for a beautiful and dignified dwelling place for Joseph in their home (Bd, Z).

It may be that he will bring us some benefit, or that we may take him as a son are the same words uttered to Pharaoh by his wife in connection with the infant

Moses; see 28:9. Potiphar proposed that they might take Joseph as their son, because they did not have children (Ṭs) and were unable to have them (Bḍ, JJ). *And thus did We establish Joseph in the land* (*land* meaning Egypt; IK) refers to God's actions in saving Joseph from death, taking him out of the well, and placing him in the house of Potiphar (cf. Genesis 39:2–6; Bg); see also v. 56. *That We might teach him the interpretation of events* refers to God's teaching Joseph the interpretation of dreams that foretold events (see vv. 6, 36–37, 41, 43–49; Bg); this gift was the primary means by which he would achieve ascendancy in Egyptian society (see vv. 54–56). *God prevails over His affair* is understood to mean that, although Joseph's brothers willed for him to remain in the well, God willed to exalt him to a station of proximity to the king (Qu). *Most of mankind know not* occurs two other times in this *sūrah* (vv. 40, 68) and in 7:187; 16:38; 30:6, 30; 34:28, 36; 40:57; 45:26.

We gave him wisdom, that is, prophethood or the ability to judge between people with justice (Aj), *and knowledge*, that is, knowledge of dream interpretation and future events or knowledge of the mysteries and the proper etiquette of servanthood toward God (Aj). *Thus do We recompense the virtuous* also appears verbatim in 6:84 and 28:14; see also 5:85. *Virtuous* is used in connection with Joseph numerous times in this *sūrah*; see vv. 36, 56, 78, 90; 12:36c.

23 But she in whose house he was staying sought to lure him from himself. She locked the doors and said, “Come, thou!” He said, “God be my refuge! Truly He is my lord, and has made beautiful my accommodation. Verily the wrongdoers will not prosper!”

23 The Prophet is reported to have said that Joseph was given half of beauty, which has commonly been interpreted to mean that he was given half of the beauty in the world (cf. Genesis 39:7). Potiphar's wife, Zulaykhā, who was commissioned by her husband to tend to Joseph's needs while he was a guest in their home, fell in love with him because of his exceptional physical beauty (IK). His beauty was such that it caused her to desire him sexually (R), and she thus *sought to lure him from himself*, that is, to seduce him (IK). Joseph's objection, *He is my lord, and has made beautiful my accommodation*, can be a reference to Potiphar (Kl, Q, Ṭs), who in v. 21 orders Zulaykhā to give Joseph *honorable accommodation* (N, Z). According to this reading, Joseph's statement is tantamount to saying, “Potiphar has honored me, and I shall not betray him” (Q; cf. Genesis 39:8–10). Alternately, the

reference can be to God (Bg, Kl, Qu); according to this reading, it would mean “He Most High is my true Master and is the One Who saved me from the well and gave me a great standing in the ‘Azīz’s heart, so that he provided for me an honorable accommodation. Therefore, it is not fitting that I should have the audacity to disobey Him” (Qu).

24 She indeed inclined toward him, and he would have inclined toward her, had he not seen the proof of his Lord. Thus it was, that We might turn him away from evil and indecency. Truly he was among Our sincere servants.

24 Most commentators mention that Joseph desired Zulaykhā just as she desired him, but he did not act on his desire; for him it was a passing feeling occurring in his heart, and he did not follow through with it. Instead, he immediately turned to God and dismissed the thought of attraction to her as soon as he had *seen the proof of his Lord* (Kl). Al-Rāzī compares this account to righteous persons who, while fasting during the summer, see rosewater with ice in it; they would naturally be inclined to drink it, but, given their faithful adherence to the religious law, they do not do so.

One widely reported incident explains what is meant by Joseph’s seeing *the proof of his Lord*. Zulaykhā, who worshipped idols, had covered an idol in the room. When Joseph asked her why she had done that, she replied by saying that she was ashamed to sin before the idol. Upon hearing this account, Joseph asked how she could be ashamed before an idol, which can neither see nor hear, but was not ashamed before God, Who is Hearing and Seeing (My). This exchange led Joseph to contemplate his own situation before God, and this realization served as his *proof* (My, Q). Alternately, it is said that the *proof* was that the Archangel Gabriel appeared before Joseph (R). *That We might turn him away from evil* refers to keeping him from being disloyal to Potiphar (IJ, JJ) or from having a deep-rooted sexual desire (*shahwah*) for Potiphar’s wife (Q); *indecency* refers to the illicit sexual act (JJ).

25 And they raced to the door, while she tore his shirt from behind. And they encountered her master at the door. She

said, “What is the recompense for one who desires ill toward thy wife, save that he be imprisoned, or a painful punishment?”

25 Joseph attempted to flee from Zulaykhā and made for the door; she chased after him (JJ), tearing his shirt from behind in her attempt to prevent him from escaping (Kl; cf. Genesis 39:11–12). When they met Potiphar at the door, Zulaykhā sought to exonerate herself by making it appear as though she was the victim fleeing from Joseph (Bd). Although Zulaykhā was in love with Joseph, her love for him was not yet complete and sincere, for she lied to Potiphar in order to save herself, even though it meant accusing Joseph of an act that he did not commit (My), namely, intending *ill* toward her, which alludes to illicit sexual relations (Āl); for a discussion of the progression of Zulaykhā’s love, see 12:51c. It is also said that with her question to Potiphar, which was actually a suggestion (Āl, Bd), Zulaykhā sought to incite Potiphar’s jealousy and rage in order to take revenge upon Joseph for not complying with her wishes (Aj; cf. Genesis 39:13–19). Some commentators, especially Sufi ones, mention that Zulaykhā’s love for Joseph was so great that it blinded her to every other consideration.

26 He said, “It was she who sought to lure me from myself.” And a witness from her own people testified, “If his shirt is torn from the front, then she has spoken the truth and he is among the liars.

27 But if his shirt is torn from behind, then she has lied and he is among the truthful.”

26–27 Joseph’s words in his defense mean, “She wanted to commit indecency with me, but I refused and fled” (Bg). *A witness from her own people* refers, according to many traditional sources, to one of Zulaykhā’s paternal cousins who was a wise man (R). If the shirt were torn from the front, it would indicate that Zulaykhā was telling the truth, because it would mean that Zulaykhā struggled to defend herself from Joseph (Kl). That the shirt was torn from the back indicates that Joseph was telling the truth, because it means that Zulaykhā chased Joseph and laid hold of his shirt from the back to keep him from escaping (Kl).

28 So when he saw that his shirt was torn from behind, he said, “Verily this is among the schemes of you women—your scheming is great indeed!

28 *He* in *he saw* can refer to Potiphar or to the wise man from Zulaykhā’s family (Q). If it refers to Potiphar, then his statement *Verily this is among the schemes of you women* would be a response to Zulaykhā’s lie to him in v. 25, *What is the recompense for one who desires ill toward thy wife?* (Q).

29 Joseph, turn away from this. And you, seek forgiveness for your sin. Truly you were among those at fault.”

29 Here the speaker is understood by some to be the wise man from Zulaykhā’s family (Q). His advice to Joseph to *turn away from this* means that Joseph should not mention this incident to anyone and should conceal its details (Q, Z), lest it become known to the public (JJ) and presumably form the basis of much speculation and rumormongering. The news of this event nevertheless spread, as indicated in v. 30.

30 Some women of the city said, “The viceroy’s wife sought to lure her slave boy from himself! He has filled her with ardent love. Truly we consider her to be in manifest error.”

30 As the news of what transpired between Joseph and Zulaykhā spread throughout Egypt, some of the wives of the notables began criticizing and blaming Zulaykhā for her attempt to seduce Joseph (IK). *He has filled her with ardent love* means Zulaykhā’s love for Joseph had reached the deepest recesses of her heart (My) and become all-consuming (R). Like the brothers who accused Jacob in v. 8 of being *in manifest error* because of his intense love for Joseph, the women considered Zulaykhā *to be in manifest error* because of her ardent love for him

(R).

31 So when she heard of their plotting, she sent for them, and prepared a repast for them, and gave each of them a knife. And she said [to Joseph], “Come out before them!” Then when they saw him, they so admired him that they cut their hands and said, “God be praised! This is no human being. This is naught but a noble angel!”

31 The talk among the wives of the notables of Egypt concerning Zulaykhā and Joseph is referred to as *plotting* because it was carried out in secret (Kl) and was therefore tantamount to gossip. Al-Rāzī observes that the women’s talk here is called *plotting* because they themselves wanted to look upon Joseph and knew that their gossip would force Zulaykhā to let them do so in order to exonerate herself of any blame. It is said that Zulaykhā invited forty women in total, five of whom were involved in the gossip (Bg, N). They sat together, and she gave each of them some citrons and a knife and told them to cut the fruit, inviting Joseph in the room at the same time (Qm). When they saw Joseph, “the rays of his beauty illuminated their interior temples” (My), and they *cut their hands* instead of the fruit, as they fell into a state of utter bewilderment and lost the ordinary consciousness of themselves (My).

Here *God be praised!* is meant as an expression of amazement over God’s creative Power, in this case over His creating the likes of Joseph (Kl). By likening Joseph to *a noble angel* the women sought to express their utter amazement at his unparalleled, celestial beauty. It was also their way of acknowledging that Joseph did not commit any act of lewdness with Zulaykhā, since they saw in him his inner purity. Their vision of him made it clear to them that he was, like an angel, untainted by the normal passions that characterize the human condition (R).

32 She said, “This is the one on whose account you blamed me. I indeed sought to lure him from himself, but he remained chaste. And if he does not do as I command, he shall surely be imprisoned; and he shall be among those

humbled.”

32 Zulaykhā’s statement *This is the one on whose account you blamed me* suggests that, since the women could not even withstand the sight of Joseph for one moment without losing their senses, she could not be blamed for what she did, as he was in her presence night and day (Ṭs). In so doing she admitted her “fault” and Joseph’s innocence. *If he does not do as I command* refers to her original command to Joseph to lie with her; see 12:23c.

33 He said, “My Lord! Prison is dearer to me than that to which they call me. If Thou dost not turn their scheming away from me, I shall incline toward them and be among the ignorant.”

33 It is said that when the women heard Zulaykhā’s ultimatum to Joseph, they supported her, telling him that he had no choice but to obey her command, lest he be thrown into prison (R). Joseph’s preference for prison over what the women were inciting him to do means that he preferred the next life over the fleeting pleasures of this life; succumbing to the women’s suggestion would entail pleasure in this life, but punishment in the next, whereas entering prison would entail discomfort in this life, but great felicity in the next (R), as he was forsaking a human love that was real but illicit for the Love of God. Joseph turned to God in humility (Kl) and asked for His Assistance, since he knew that he could only be saved from his plight by God, not as a result of his own efforts (Qu).

34 So his Lord answered him, and turned their scheming away from him. Truly He is the Hearing, the Knowing.

34 God responded to Joseph and *turned their scheming away from him* by so strengthening his ability to resist the women that he actually accepted the hardships of prison (Aj). The connection between supplication and God’s Response is established elsewhere in the Quran, as in 40:60: *Call upon Me, and I shall respond to you.*

35 Then it occurred to them, after they had seen the signs, that they should imprison him for a time.

35 *Them* refers to the family of Potiphar and Zulaykhā or to those members of Potiphar's entourage with whom he consulted about this matter (Kl); *the signs* refers to the indications of Joseph's innocence (JJ, Kl). The decision to imprison Joseph *for a time* was a temporary measure until the rumors about what transpired between Joseph and Zulaykhā had subsided (JJ; cf. Genesis 39:20).

36 Now two young men entered the prison with him. One of them said, "Truly I see myself [in a dream] pressing wine." The other said, "Truly I see myself [in a dream] carrying bread atop my head, from which the birds eat." "Inform us of its interpretation. Truly we see you as being among the virtuous."

36 Most commentaries state that the *two young men* who were in prison with Joseph were servants to the king of Egypt. One of them was his baker (Ṭ) and the other his wine carrier (JJ, Ṭ). The baker had plotted to poison the king. He was caught and imprisoned, and the wine carrier was imprisoned as well, since the king thought that he had aided the baker in the attempt to kill him (R, Ṭ; cf. Genesis 40:1–3). The young man who had dreamed of the wine was the wine carrier, and the young man who had dreamed of the bread was the baker (Bg; for their dreams as narrated in Genesis, see 40:9–11, 16–17). They reportedly asked Joseph to interpret their dreams for them, because they had seen him interpret other people's dreams (JJ). Al-Rāzī reports that, seeing Joseph's virtuous character and kind behavior toward the other prison mates as well as his devout religious practices, the baker and the wine carrier concluded that he was *among the virtuous*, whose interpretation of dreams could therefore be trusted (cf. Genesis 40:6–8). For Joseph's interpretation of these two dreams, see v. 41.

37 He said, “No food with which you are provided will come unto you, save that I shall inform you of its interpretation before it comes. This is among the things my Lord has taught me. I forsake the creed of a people who believe not in God, and they who are disbelievers in the Hereafter.

38 And I follow the creed of my fathers, Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob. It is not for us to ascribe any partners unto God. That is from the bounty God has bestowed upon us and upon mankind, but most of mankind do not give thanks.

37–38 In speaking of *food with which you are provided*, Joseph is alluding to the dreams that the young men in prison might have in their sleep, which he assures them he will be able to interpret before they become actualized as events in their waking state (Aj, JJ; cf. Genesis 40:8). For Joseph’s being taught the ability to interpret dreams, see 12:6c. Some interpret this verse to mean that God taught him these *things* because he rejected *the creed of a people who believe not in God* (Bd). Alternately, the verse may be understood to mean that Joseph made mention of his God-given knowledge and his faith as a means to invite the young men to believe in God’s Oneness (Aj).

That in That is from the bounty God has bestowed is a reference to the affirmation of God’s Oneness (JJ) or an allusion to the fact stated by Joseph when he said, *It is not for us to ascribe any partners unto God* (R), meaning, “The nonascription of partners to God is among the bounties that God has bestowed.” For the idea that the majority are ungrateful, see 2:243; 10:60; 27:73; 40:61; 10:59–60c.

39 O my fellow prisoners! Are diverse lords better, or God, the One, the Paramount?

40 You worship apart from Him naught but names that you

have named—you and your fathers—for which God has sent down no authority. Judgment belongs to God alone. He commands that you worship none but Him. That is the upright religion, but most of mankind know not.

39–40 After establishing the importance of prophecy in v. 38, v. 39 seeks to establish the basis of prophecy, namely, its Divine Origin (R). The majority of prophets were faced with the reality of people’s worship of false divinities, and this was also the case with Joseph. This is why v. 39 begins with a demonstration of the futility of taking gods alongside God (R). The rhetorical question *Are diverse lords better, or God, the One, the Paramount?* alludes to the Quran’s teaching that if there were more than one god, the cosmic order would contain fissures and would go to ruin, whereas the being of the One God, who is the Source of all reality, makes possible the order and beauty in the cosmos (R), as in 21:22: *Were there gods other than God in them, they would surely have been corrupted* (R).

After establishing the necessity, both logical and ontological, of God’s Oneness, v. 40 then draws attention to the need to worship the one true God and not the false gods divinized by idolatrous people. For the Quran’s insistence that false gods are nothing more than the names assigned to them, see 7:71; 53:23. God’s Command *that you worship none but Him* is analogous to 17:23: *Thy Lord decrees that you worship none but Him*. For *That is the upright religion, but most of mankind know not*, see 6:161c; 30:30c.

41 O my fellow prisoners! As for one of you, he shall serve wine to his lord. But as for the other, he shall be crucified, and the birds will eat from his head. The matter about which you inquired has been decreed.”

41 Joseph offers his interpretation of the young men’s dreams: the wine carrier would be saved and restored to his former position (N) as a wine server to the king of Egypt (K1; cf. Genesis 40:12–13); the baker would be crucified for his crime, and after his death the birds would *eat from his head* (My; cf. Genesis 40:18–19).

42 And he said to the one of them whom he knew would be saved, “Mention me to your lord.” But Satan caused him to forget to make mention to his lord. So he remained in prison for several years.

42 Joseph told the wine carrier to mention him to the king of Egypt (Kl; cf. Genesis 40:14–15), but *Satan caused him to forget to make mention to his lord*; that is, he forgot to mention Joseph to the king (Kl). On account of this, Joseph’s stay in prison was prolonged *for several years*, a total of seven years according to most commentators (IK, N).

Satan caused him to forget to make mention to his lord can also be translated, “Satan caused him to forget remembering his Lord,” in which case it would mean that at the particular moment when Joseph told the wine carrier, *Mention me to your lord*, he forgot to remember God (Kl, Q). As a consequence of his forgetfulness, God caused Joseph to be in prison *for several years*. According to Ibn ‘Abbās, had Joseph remembered God when he told the wine carrier to mention him to his lord, God would have released him from prison earlier (Q). About this, the Prophet is reported to have said, “God have mercy on Joseph. Had it not been for a statement he made—*Mention me to your lord*—he would not have remained in the prison as long as he did” (Ṭ).

43 And the king said, “Verily I see [in a dream] seven fat cows being eaten by seven lean ones; and seven green heads of grain, and others dry. O notables! Give me your opinion on my vision, if you can interpret visions.”

43 The king’s request to his *notables*, namely, those in his entourage and in high offices in his kingdom (Kl), to give him their *opinion* means that he wanted them to interpret the dream for him (JJ). By *visions* here are meant true or veridical dreams (see 12:4c). The verb rendered *interpret* (‘*abara*) in *if you can interpret visions* comes from the root ‘-b-r, which conveys the idea of “crossing over” from one side of something to the other. With respect to dream interpretation, the verb derived from this root connotes the notion of moving from the imaginal and symbolic forms in dreams to the actual meanings they symbolize (Bḏ). For the interpretation of the king’s dream, see vv. 47–49 (cf. Genesis 41:1–8).

44 They said, “What confused dreams! And we are not experts in the interpretation of dreams!”

44 *Interpretation* translates *ta'wīl*, which etymologically conveys the sense of bringing something back to its origin; see also v. 6c and v. 21. In the Quran, the term has several usages, among which are the interpretation of the multivalent, symbolic, or equivocal (*mutashābih*) verses (as in 3:7; see also 10:39) and the explanation of events whose meanings are not immediately clear (as in 18:87). In the context of dreams, *ta'wīl* means to arrive at the original or intended meaning of a dream. In the Islamic intellectual tradition, *ta'wīl* also came to signify more particularly the spiritual or esoteric hermeneutics that reveals the inner meanings of a Quranic verse and is often contrasted with *tafsīr*, which is concerned with its outward meaning. However, the distinction between these two terms is not rigid: the title of al-Ṭabarī's encyclopedic commentary on the Quran uses the word *ta'wīl*, not *tafsīr*, in its title. For the different uses and meanings of *ta'wīl* in the Quran, see 3:7c; 7:53c.

Dreams translates *aḥlām*, which in this verse is a synonym for *ru'yā*, or *vision*, in v. 43. The notables describe the king's vision as *confused dreams*—that is, as belonging to the category of mixed-up and false dreams—which stem from the internal chatter of the soul (*nafs*) or from demonic inspiration and are therefore not susceptible to meaningful interpretation (K1), because there is nothing in them corresponding to objective reality (My). By saying that they are not adept in the art of dream interpretation, the king's notables could be referring to false dreams in particular or, more likely, to their inability to interpret dreams in general (K1).

45 Now the one who had been saved among the two said, remembering after a while, “I shall inform you of its interpretation, so send me forth.”

45 The wine carrier remembered Joseph's words in v. 42 (Bg). *After a while* refers to a period of seven years (Bg), which corresponds to the length of time Joseph spent in prison (see 12:42c). The wine carrier managed to convince the king to allow him to consult with Joseph about the dream by pointing to his own experience with Joseph's powers of dream interpretation: when in prison, Joseph

interpreted the wine carrier's dream, and it came to pass exactly as he had said that it would (My); cf. Genesis 41:9–14.

46 “Joseph, O truthful one! Give us thine opinion concerning seven fat cows being eaten by seven lean ones, and seven green heads of grain, and others dry, that haply I may return to the people, that they might know.”

46 Returning to Joseph's prison cell, the wine carrier calls him the *truthful one*, which can refer to the fact that Joseph interpreted his dream truthfully or to the fact that he had never seen Joseph tell a lie during their time together in prison (R; see also 12:36c). By telling Joseph that he sought his interpretation of the dream *that they might know*, the wine carrier was indicating that the king and his notables might come to know of his interpretation of the king's dream (My), or of Joseph's true rank and knowledge and thus release him from prison (My, Ts). When the wine carrier related the dream to Joseph, Joseph saw this as an opportunity to impress the king by interpreting the dream so that he could be set free. At the same time, Joseph also saw an opportunity to help the king, as a part of the dream signaled an agricultural crisis for the people of Egypt (see v. 48); cf. Genesis 41:14–24.

47 He said, “You will sow diligently for seven years. Then whatever you harvest, leave in its ear, save a little that you eat.

48 Then after this will come seven hard [years] which will devour that which you have saved in advance for them, save a little of that which you have stored.

49 Then after this will come a year wherein people will be granted succor, and wherein they will press [wine and oil].”

47–49 Joseph’s interpretation of the dream offers a window into what would happen during the next fifteen years of Egypt’s agrarian cycle. During the first phase, the Egyptians would *sow diligently for seven years*, as this would be a time of great fertility and abundance (R). The second phase would bring *seven hard [years]*, that is, a time of dearth that would be exceedingly difficult for people (R). Joseph proposed to store up much of the harvest during the first phase so that the people would have food during the second phase. The year of *succor* during which people will *press [wine and oil]* refers to the last year of the cycle, which would be a blessed year of much bounty for the people of Egypt (R); the pressing of oil and wine is an indication that there would be food in abundance once again; cf. Genesis 41:25–36.

50 The king said, “Bring him to me!” So when the messenger came to him he said, “Return to your lord and ask him, ‘What of the women who cut their hands? Surely my Lord knows well their scheming!’”

50 When the wine carrier, here called *the messenger*, returned and informed the king of Joseph’s interpretation of his dream, the king asked that he bring Joseph to him (JJ). But when the messenger approached Joseph in order to release him from prison, Joseph sought to exonerate himself, asking, *What of the women who cut their hands?* which is understood to have been Joseph’s request that the women be confronted by the king (JJ). The messenger then returned and informed the king of Joseph’s inquiry, and the king complied by gathering the women before him (JJ).

51 He said, “What was your purpose when you sought to lure Joseph from himself?” They said, “God be praised! We know no evil against him.” The viceroy’s wife said, “Now the truth has come to light. It was I who sought to lure him from himself, and verily he is among the truthful.”

51 Confronted by the king, the women said they did not know of any *evil against him*, which is to say that they absolved Joseph of any blame (Kl). As for

Zulaykhā, it is at this point that her love for Joseph becomes fully real. Before, she had blamed him for a sin he did not commit, because her own desire was more important than his well-being (see v. 25). Later, she admitted Joseph's innocence, but only to a small group of women as a way of absolving herself of scorn in their eyes (see v. 32). Some commentators understand that at this juncture in the story her love for Joseph had grown so strong that it had surpassed her own self-interest, and so she spoke the truth about him (My). The narrative indicates that there was a progression in the degrees of love in Zulaykhā's own soul and therefore in her spiritual journey. Her initial attraction to Joseph was purely sensual, but by this point in the narrative she has overcome her lower self, and her infatuation with Joseph's physical beauty has now been transformed into a spiritual love in which she is able to see Joseph's inward beauty, much like Potiphar did when he first saw him in the marketplace (see 12:21–22c). The catalyst here seems to have been Joseph's inner virtues, marked by his quality of truthfulness, which Zulaykhā recognized when she referred to him as *among the truthful*.

52 “This is so, that he may know that I betrayed him not in his absence. Truly God guides not the scheming of the treacherous.

52 The speaker here is Joseph, who seeks to absolve himself of any blame before Potiphar (JJ, My, R, Ṭ). Alternately, the speaker here could be Zulaykhā (Kl, R, Ṭs).

53 But I absolve not my own soul. Surely the soul commands to evil, save whom my Lord may show mercy. Truly my Lord is Forgiving, Merciful.”

53 Although some have argued that the speaker here is Zulaykhā (IK, R), the majority of commentators see these words as Joseph's (Bḏ, Bg, Kl, Q, Ṭs, Z), and thus as a continuation of his statement in v. 52. It is said that Joseph uttered *I absolve not my own soul* out of humility (Kl), and because he wanted to draw attention to the fact that it was God Who protected him from falling into sin (Bḏ; see 12:24c).

Surely the soul commands to evil plays a foundational role in the Muslim understanding of moral psychology and the structure of the human soul. Islamic sources identify three levels of the soul on the basis of Quranic references. The first level is the “soul that commands to evil” (*al-naḥs al-ammārah bi’l-sū’*, based on the present verse); this is the soul that calls a person to submit to his or her base desires, and to those thoughts and actions that lead to forgetfulness of God and go against His Command. Next is the *blaming soul* (*al-naḥs al-lawwāmah*; 75:2), which reproaches a person for his or her evil states and forgetfulness of God, while actively attempting to effect change within that person for the better. Finally, the highest kind of soul is the *soul at peace* (*al-naḥs al-muṭma’innah*; 89:27), which has conquered the lower self and resides in peace in the remembrance of God, returning to God *content* (*rāḍiyah*) and *contenting* [to God] (*marḍiyyah*). Regarding these kinds of souls, see 75:1–2c and 89:27c.

54 And the king said, “Bring him to me, that I might reserve him exclusively for myself.” Then when he had spoken with him, he said, “Truly this day thou shalt be of high rank and trusted in our presence.”

55 He said, “Set me over the storehouses of the land. Truly I am a skilled keeper.”

54–55 After having summoned Joseph and *spoken with him*, the king realizes his intelligence, wisdom, and virtue (Q, T); he then expresses a desire to reserve Joseph’s abilities *exclusively* for himself and eventually sets him over the *storehouses of the land*. Cf. Genesis 41:37–44.

56 Thus did We establish Joseph in the land, that there he might settle wheresoever he will. We cause Our Mercy to fall upon whomsoever We will, and We neglect not the reward of the virtuous.

57 And the reward of the Hereafter is better for those who believe and are reverent.

56–57 As in v. 21, *Thus did We establish Joseph in the land* (cf. Genesis 41:45) comes after Joseph undergoes a period of trial and hardship. The purpose of establishing Joseph in Egypt in v. 21 is so that God *might teach him the interpretation of events*—that is, dreams (see 12:21–22c)—whereas in v. 56 it is in order that Joseph *might settle wheresoever he will*. These two verses are therefore connected, since it was only after Joseph interpreted several dreams that he was given such a powerful position in Egypt that he could choose to live *wheresoever he will*, which some interpret to mean that Joseph could “establish his home in any of Egypt’s cities because of his control over all of them” (Kā). It is also said that when Potiphar died, the king of Egypt gave Joseph Potiphar’s former position of being in charge of the treasury of Egypt. By extension, this would also mean that Joseph was conferred the title of °Azīz.

For God’s not neglecting *the reward of the virtuous*, see also vv. 90; 11:115; 11:115c. In several verses, *the reward of the Hereafter* is spoken of as *greater* than the reward of this world (16:41), and the Hereafter itself is described as *better for thee than this life* (93:4). This is because *the life of this world is naught but diversion and play*, whereas *the Abode of the Hereafter is life indeed* (29:64).

58 The brothers of Joseph came and entered upon him, and he recognized them, while they knew him not.

58 The brothers came to Egypt because the famine that had afflicted Egypt had also affected Canaan (cf. Genesis 42:1–8), and they sought to purchase some of the provisions that had been stored up during the seven years of Egypt’s agricultural prosperity (see 12:47–49c; Bḏ, K1). The brothers did not recognize Joseph because a long period of time had elapsed since they last saw him. Moreover, he now stood before them adorned in rich Egyptian garments, and their awe of him naturally prevented them from recognizing him as their brother, whom they assumed had perished after they had thrown him into the well so many years before (Bḏ; see 12:15c).

59 And when he had arranged for their provisions, he said, “Bring me a brother of yours from your father. Do you not see that I give full measure, and that I am the best of hosts?”

59 *Provisions* here denotes the food that the brothers had purchased from Joseph (Kl). The brother *from your father* whom Joseph has in mind is considered by commentators to be Benjamin (JJ; see 12:8c), although his name is not mentioned in the Quran. The ten brothers who came to Egypt brought with their eleven camels and were requesting eleven camel-loads of food, ten for themselves and one for Benjamin, who was at home (Q). But Joseph requested that the other brother who was not present be brought to him as proof that there was in fact another dependent who would justify the purchase of another camel-load of food during a time of scarcity (Q). His question is seen as a subtle way of denying the brothers their request without accusing them of wrongdoing (R).

60 But if you bring him not unto me, you shall have no measure from me, nor shall you come nigh unto me.”

61 They said, “We shall seek to lure him from his father; that we shall surely do.”

60–61 Cf. Genesis 42:9–20. In the Quranic account Joseph tells his brothers that without meeting his request he would not do business with them; nor would they even be allowed to enter the city (Bg), since their failure to meet his condition would mean that they were lying when requesting the extra camel-load of food. The brothers assured Joseph that next time they would return with their eleventh brother, as they knew they would need to come to Egypt for more food in the future.

62 He said to his servant boys, “Put their merchandise in their saddlebags. Perchance they will recognize it when they have gone back to their people; perchance they will return.”

62 *Their merchandise* refers to those goods that the brothers had presented to Joseph in exchange for food (Bg, Z) or the actual price (*athmān*) the brothers paid for the food (JJ, My, Ṭ). By returning all of the merchandise to the brothers, Joseph sought to gain their confidence and reliance upon him for future transactions, with the intention that they would soon return with their brother Benjamin; cf. Genesis 42:25–26.

63 So when they returned to their father, they said, “O father! The measure has been withheld from us. So send our brother with us that we might obtain the measure. We shall surely be his keepers.”

63 *The measure has been withheld from us* refers to the rest of the food that the brothers sought to acquire (My), namely, the eleventh camel-load of food (see v. 59; Bg). *That we might obtain the measure* means “that we may obtain the food” (Bg), that is, the full measure of food they were seeking.

64 He said, “Should I entrust him to you as I entrusted his brother to you aforetime? But God is the best of keepers, and He is the most Merciful of the merciful.”

64 *His brother* is a reference to Joseph (JJ; see 12:15c). *God is the best of keepers* implies Jacob’s trust in God and his resignation of the whole affair to Him (Aj). For God as *the most Merciful of the merciful*, see also v. 92; 7:151; 21:83.

65 And when they opened their belongings, they found their merchandise had been returned to them. They said, “O father! What [more] do we seek? This is our merchandise returned unto us! Now we can provide for our family, and keep watch over our brother, while getting another camel-

load—these are meager rations!”

65 Here the brothers appeal to Joseph’s gesture of goodwill in order to convince Jacob to allow them to take Benjamin (Bg), whose presence before Joseph was essential for obtaining more food. The *meager rations* are the food that the brothers already had in their possession, namely, the ten camel-loads’ worth (see 12:59c), which was not enough to sustain them for long (Kl); cf. Genesis 42:27–36.

66 He said, “I will not send him forth with you till you give me a solemn pledge before God that you will surely bring him back to me, unless you are surrounded.” So when they gave their solemn pledge, he said, “God is Guardian over what we say.”

66 Jacob has his sons make a *solemn pledge* that they will return Benjamin to him, as he did earlier with Joseph (see 12:15c). The only difference is that, with respect to Benjamin, Jacob also includes the caveat *unless you are surrounded*, which is a general condition (Z) interpreted to mean “unless you come to a situation in which you cannot uphold the oath” (JJ). *God is Guardian over what we say* means that God is a witness to the oath (R); cf. Genesis 42:36–38. The same statement is uttered by Moses in 28:28 when he takes an oath with his future father-in-law.

67 And he said, “O my sons! Enter not by one gate, but enter by separate gates. Yet, I cannot avail you aught against God. Judgment belongs to God alone. I trust in Him; and let those who trust, trust in Him.”

67 Cf. Genesis 43:11–15. Jacob’s advice to his sons to enter by *separate gates* was given to help them avoid the evil eye (R), which in many traditional cultures, especially those of the Mediterranean and Near East, is associated with

bad omens that afflict people because they are objects of envy. Jacob sought to protect the brothers from the evil eye upon entering Egypt, since they were very handsome (Bd, N) and had fallen victim to the evil eye the last time they were there (Aj). By entering through different doors instead of one door in a large group, the brothers' presence would be more discreet, and thus they would be less prone to the effects of the evil eye. Other commentators do not associate this verse with a fear of the evil eye, but simply with practical caution against attracting unwanted attention, since the brothers had become recognizable and might have attracted hostility or jealousy if they entered as a single group (R). *I cannot avail you aught against God* means that, despite Jacob's advice to his sons, they cannot escape what God has destined for them (Bd, Z).

68 And when they entered whence their father had commanded them, it did not avail them aught against God, but it fulfilled a need in Jacob's soul. Truly he was possessed of knowledge because of that which We taught him, but most of mankind know not.

68 *It did not avail them aught against God* means that, despite the measures the brothers took to avoid having evil befall them on their second trip to Egypt, they would nonetheless soon undergo a major trial (Bd; see vv. 70–82). *But it fulfilled a need in Jacob's soul*; that is, Jacob's advice to his sons, along with their acceptance of it, was a means to assuage Jacob's fear of losing his children (R).

69 And when they entered upon Joseph, he drew his brother close to himself and said, "Truly I am your brother; so be not distressed on account of that which they used to do."

69 Cf. Genesis 43:29–31. When the brothers came to Joseph, he honored them and treated them kindly. He managed to inform Benjamin in private that he was his brother (IK, K1) and explained all that had happened to him (IK). He then gave Benjamin solace, telling him not to be saddened by what the brothers had

done, noting that these events were in the past and according to God's Will (Bg). He also asked Benjamin not to mention their private meeting to the other brothers (IK). Ibn Kathīr states that Joseph and Benjamin then devised a plan that would ensure that Benjamin would remain with him (see vv. 70–82); al-Ṭabarī, however, says that the plan was not known to Benjamin.

70 And when he had made ready their provisions, he put the drinking cup into his brother's saddlebag. Then a herald cried out, "O you men of the caravan! Truly you are thieves!"

71 Turning toward them, they said, "What are you missing?"

70–71 *His brother's saddlebag* means Benjamin's bag, filled with his belongings (Ṭ). As mentioned in v. 72, the drinking cup was *the goblet of the king*. It was used by him not only for drinking, but also for measuring food (Ṭ); it is said to have been made of gold and studded with jewels (JJ). Jacob had a rule about stealing—whoever was caught stealing would be distanced from him—so Joseph placed the goblet in Benjamin's bag, because that would make Benjamin appear to be culpable for the "crime" (Aj, Kl).

72 They said, "We are missing the goblet of the king." "For whosoever brings it forth, there shall be a camel-load. I shall be its guarantor."

73 They said, "By God, you certainly know that we came not to work corruption in the land, and we are not thieves."

72–73 Joseph's companions were the ones who said, *We are missing the goblet of the king* (Ṭs), but the declaration for *a camel-load* of food (JJ) was uttered by the herald (Kl, Ṭs). *I shall be its guarantor* means whoever is able to

produce the cup will be given the camel-load (T).

74 They said, “And what will be the recompense for it if you be liars?”

75 They said, “Its recompense will be that he in whose saddlebag it is found—he himself shall be its recompense. Thus do we recompense the wrongdoers.”

74–75 The brothers’ response, *he himself shall be its recompense*, means that whoever is the one in whose bag the king’s goblet is found will be punished for his crime by being given over by the brothers to Joseph and his entourage. It is said that this was the brothers’ custom when dealing with thieves, namely, to give the thief over to the one from whom he had stolen, just as the latter’s property had been taken over by the thief (Th). The brothers then let Joseph search their bags (JJ).

76 Then he began with their baggage, before the baggage of his brother. Then he removed it from his brother’s baggage. Thus did We devise a scheme for Joseph. Under the king’s law, he could not have taken his brother unless God willed. We raise in degrees whomsoever We will, and above every possessor of knowledge is a knower.

76 *Thus did We devise a scheme for Joseph* indicates that the plan to place the cup in Benjamin’s bag was based on Divine Revelation (*wahy*), because the ultimate goal of the plot was for God to show His Solicitude to Joseph’s brothers (Aj). Some commentators say that the king’s rules for theft were that if someone was caught stealing, the person would be physically beaten for the crime and then charged double the worth of the item that had been stolen (R). Thus, *under the king’s law, Joseph could not have taken his brother unless God willed*: if Joseph had followed the king’s law, which would have been the normal course of action, he would not have been able to keep Benjamin, who would have been free to go

back with his brothers after the king's stipulated punishment. Instead, God willed that the brothers would themselves put forward the punishment for theft according to their own custom (see 12:74–75c), because of which Joseph's plan was carried out (R).

For *We raise in degrees whomsoever We will*, see 6:83c; see also 40:15, where God is referred to as *the Raiser of degrees*. In the present context, *above every possessor of knowledge is a knower* means that, although Joseph's brothers were learned and possessed of knowledge, Joseph had more knowledge than they (R), and that all knowledge ends with God (Aj), who is referred to as the *Knower* throughout the Quran. This verse also has a more universal import and is often cited in a more general context by Muslim writers. It points to the hierarchy of knowledge and the fact that no matter how much knowledge a human being gains, there is always a higher degree of knowledge, the highest of which is God's Knowledge.

77 They said, “If he has stolen, a brother of his had stolen aforetime.” But Joseph kept it secret in his soul and disclosed it not unto them. He said, “You are in a worse position! And God knows best concerning that which you describe.”

77 *A brother of his had stolen aforetime* is a reference to Joseph, who, when he was younger, is said to have stolen an idol from his maternal grandfather and destroyed it, lest it be worshipped (IK, JJ, R). What Joseph kept . . . secret in his soul refers to his response to his brothers, *You are in a worse position*, which he said to himself and did not voice aloud (Z). By it he meant that the brothers were in a worse position than Benjamin, since they stole him (Joseph) from their father and treated him unjustly, and Benjamin did not participate in this act (JJ, Z).

78 They said, “O viceroy! He has a venerable, aged father; so take one of us in his place. Truly we see you as being among the virtuous.”

79 He said, “God be my refuge that we should take any save the one with whom we found our property! For then we would surely be wrongdoers.”

78–79 For the way Joseph came to occupy Potiphar’s former rank and position of *viceroy*, see 12:56–57c. Benjamin’s *venerable, aged father* refers to Jacob. By mentioning their father, the brothers were saying that Jacob loves Benjamin more than them, and that since Benjamin has been a means of solace for Jacob in place of Joseph, not getting Benjamin back would cause him more grief (JJ).

80 So when they despaired of [swaying] him, they conferred privately. The eldest of them said, “Do you not know that your father has taken a solemn pledge from you before God, and earlier you neglected Joseph? Thus I shall not depart from this land till my father grants me leave, or God renders judgment upon me, and He is the best of judges!

80 *The eldest of them* refers to Reuben (not named in the Quran, but recorded as such in the commentaries; see 12:10c). For the *solemn pledge* that the brothers took with Jacob, see v. 66. The brothers *neglected Joseph* when they failed to take care of him (Bg, Ṭs) and, by extension, when they broke the vow they had made to Jacob to return Joseph safely (Ṭs; see also 12:15c). Reuben states that he will not leave Egypt until either his *father grants him leave*—that is, Jacob calls him to return home (see also v. 83)—or *God renders judgment upon him*, referring to God’s Decision to return Benjamin to him or to send him back home without Benjamin (Bg). For God as *the best of judges* and other cognate expressions in the Quran, see 7:87c.

81 Return unto your father and say, ‘O father! Verily your son has committed theft. And we bore witness to that

which we knew, but we are not keepers of the unseen.

82 So ask the town wherein we were, and the caravan with which we approached. Verily we are truthful.”

81–82 *We are not keepers of the unseen* means that there was no way the brothers could have foreseen that Benjamin would “steal” in Egypt when they made their pact with Jacob (Z). By stating this point, the brothers wished to absolve themselves of breaking the oath, implicitly invoking the exceptional condition that Jacob included in his pledge with them (see v. 66). The *town* refers to the people of Egypt, and the *caravan* to the people of Canaan (JJ). It is said that when the latter returned to Jacob, they testified to the brothers’ truthfulness (JJ).

83 He said, “Nay, your souls have seduced you in this matter. Beautiful patience! It may be that God will bring them to me all together. Truly He is the Knowing, the Wise.”

83 Jacob’s words here are similar to his response to the news of the loss of Joseph in v. 18. The pronoun *them* refers to Joseph, Benjamin, and Reuben, who were still in Egypt (see v. 80; K1); such a statement is a kind of prophecy, since Joseph was still not known to be alive (see commentary on vv. 85–87).

84 And he turned away from them and said, “Oh, how great is my grief for Joseph!” His eyes had turned white with grief, and he was choked with anguish.

84 It is said that in his sadness, Jacob wept so much that he went blind (My) or that his eyesight became very weak (K1), which is indicated by the words *his eyes had turned white*.

85 They said, “By God, wilt thou go on remembering Joseph till thou art ill to the point of death, or till thou hast perished?”

86 He said, “I complain of my sorrow and grief to God alone. And I know from God that which you know not.

85–86 The brothers’ question, motivated by love and compassion for their father (Ts), is a figurative way of telling him that they fear for his demise if he continues to grieve over Joseph (IK). That Jacob complains of his *sorrow and grief to God alone* harkens back to vv. 18 and 83, where he counsels himself to have *beautiful patience*, which is a form of patience in which one complains only to God about one’s suffering and not to other human beings; see 12:18c. *I know from God that which you know not* (see also v. 96) is interpreted by some to refer to Jacob’s intuitive knowledge that Joseph was still alive (R); see also vv. 84, 87; 12:18c.

87 O my sons! Go and inquire about Joseph and his brother and despair not of God’s Comfort; truly none despairs of God’s Comfort save the disbelieving people.”

87 Benjamin was in custody, which is why Jacob sent his sons to inquire about him, but Jacob also told them to *inquire about Joseph*; he believed Joseph was still alive, because he had either seen this in a dream or been informed by the Angel of Death that the latter had not taken Joseph’s soul (Q). *Despair not of God’s Comfort* means that the brothers should not lose hope in God’s Mercy (JJ, N; for their forgiveness, see vv. 92, 97). This verse is similar in meaning to 39:53: *Despair not of God’s Mercy. Truly God forgives all sins. Truly He is the Forgiving, the Merciful.*

88 So when they entered upon him they said, “O viceroy! Affliction has befallen us and our people. We bring but

meager merchandise; yet grant us full measure and be charitable unto us. Truly God shall recompense the charitable.”

88 The brothers went to Egypt in order to inquire about Joseph and Benjamin in accordance with Jacob’s wishes. When they came to Joseph (who was still not known to them as Joseph), they complained about their *affliction*, by which is meant their intense hunger (Bd), as well as their *meager merchandise*, referring to what little goods they had with them to trade for food (Bd, Q). The brothers were hoping their goods would suffice them in obtaining a *full measure* of food. *And be charitable unto us* is understood as a request for the return of Benjamin (Q).

89 He said, “Do you know what you have done with Joseph and his brother, when you were ignorant?”

90 They said, “Art thou indeed Joseph?” He said, “I am Joseph and this is my brother. God has been gracious unto us. Verily whosoever is reverent and patient—surely God neglects not the reward of the virtuous.”

89–90 Joseph’s question is about their separating him from Benjamin when they were young, and about their harming him (Joseph) and perpetrating injustices against Benjamin, such as debasing and reviling him (Kl). Joseph then makes an excuse for his brothers’ wrong actions (Kl, R), as he says, *when you were ignorant*, which refers to either their ignorance of the vileness of their actions or their general state of ignorance on account of their youth (Kl). It is said that the brothers recognized that their interlocutor was Joseph when he spoke these words to them, or when he smiled (Bd), or when he removed his crown (Sh). For *Surely God neglects not the reward of the virtuous*, see 9:120; 11:11c, 115c; 12:56.

91 “By God!” they said, “God has preferred thee over us, and we were at fault.”

92 He said, “There is no reproach against you this day. God will forgive you. And He is the most Merciful of the merciful.

91–92 Cf. Genesis 45:5–8. Joseph’s statement *There is no reproach against you this day* is described in some sources as “a beautiful form of forgiveness” (Kl). *Reproach* here can also mean physical punishment (*‘iqāb*; Kl). These words of forgiveness and comfort uttered by Joseph were cited by the Prophet Muhammad when he too forgave members of his tribe who had been his oppressors. It is said that, during the conquest of Makkah, when the Prophet had overtaken the city and the Makkan idolaters had no hope of escape, the Prophet addressed the Quraysh, “O party of the Quraysh! What do you see me doing with you?” They answered, “Good. You are a noble brother and the son of a noble brother.” Then the Prophet said, “Verily I say to you as Joseph said to his brothers: *there is no reproach against you*. Go, for you are free.”

93 Take this shirt of mine and cast it upon my father’s face; he will come to see. And bring me your family, all together.”

93 Joseph’s order to have his shirt cast over Jacob’s face was reportedly based on Divine inspiration (Kl, My). The shirt is said to be the same shirt made from the silk of Paradise that Gabriel brought to Joseph when he was in the well (see 12:15c; My); cf. Genesis 45:9–13.

94 And as the caravan set off, their father said, “Truly I sense the scent of Joseph, if you think me not senile!”

94 Jacob’s words were addressed to those of his tribe who were with him (My). Despite the fact that the caravan was on its way from Egypt to Canaan, Jacob was able to perceive Joseph’s scent because of the heavenly smell that came from his shirt (Bg, My). Some say that this was a miracle because Jacob and Joseph were prophets (My).

95 They said, “By God! Truly thou art astray as of old.”

95 Cf. 12:85–86c. By being *astray* here the brothers mean Jacob’s overabundant love for Joseph and his hope to meet with him, which they thought unreasonable under the circumstances as they knew them (JJ).

96 And when the bearer of glad tidings came, he cast it upon his face and he was restored to sight. He said, “Did I not say unto you that I know from God that which you know not?”

96 Cf. Genesis 45:9–13, 27–28. *The bearer of glad tidings* who cast Joseph’s shirt upon Jacob’s face was the same brother (see 12:10c; JJ) who had earlier interceded with the brothers when they plotted to kill Joseph (see 12:15c). For Jacob’s question, see his announcement in 12:85–86c.

97 They said, “O father! Seek forgiveness for us from our sins. Truly we were at fault.”

98 He said, “I shall indeed seek forgiveness for you from my Lord. Truly He is Forgiving, Merciful.”

97–98 This conversation occurred after the brothers returned home from Egypt (Q). Somerecord that Jacob delayed his prayer for forgiveness a certain period of time (Q, R), perhaps to ascertain whether they were being sincere and truthful (Z).

99 So when they entered upon Joseph, he drew his parents

close to himself and said, “Enter Egypt in security, if God wills!”

99 For *enter . . . in security, if God wills* with reference to the Prophet Muhammad and his followers, see 48:27, which states that the Muslims *shall enter the Sacred Mosque in security, if God wills*.

100 And he raised his parents up to the throne, and they [all] fell prostrate toward him. He said, “O my father! This is the fulfillment of my vision; my Lord has made it come true. He was good to me when He brought me forth from prison, and brought thee from the desert, after Satan incited evil between my brothers and me. Indeed, my Lord is Subtle in that which He wills. Truly He is the Knower, the Wise.

100 Cf. Genesis 46:5–7. Joseph *raised his parents up to the throne*; that is, he seated them (JJ) upon the king’s throne (K1). For Joseph’s vision of which this verse is the *fulfillment*, see 12:4c. *They [all]* refers to Joseph’s parents and his eleven brothers, which correspond to the sun, the moon, and the eleven stars, respectively (N). Prostrating toward someone was a way of greeting and honoring that person, much like standing up for someone out of respect or kissing the hand (N).

Joseph does not mention the well from which he was delivered, only the prison, since he had already told his brothers in v. 92, *There is no reproach against you this day* (N). Joseph’s blaming Satan for having *incited evil* between himself and his brothers is tantamount to his making an excuse for them for their wrong actions (Qu; see also 12:89–90c). Joseph’s description of God as *Subtle in that which He wills* means that the manner in which God carries out His Will is subtle (N).

101 My Lord! Thou hast given me something of sovereignty, and taught me the interpretation of events. Originator of the heavens and the earth! Thou art my Protector in this world

and in the Hereafter! Take me as a submitter unto Thyself, and admit me to the company of the righteous.”

101 Joseph was granted *something of sovereignty* since he had the highest standing in Egypt next to the king (see 12:56–57c.). For God as the *Originator of the heavens and the earth*, see 2:117; 6:14, 101; 35:1; 39:46; 42:11; see also 6:14c; 35:1c. God is described throughout the Quran as a *Protector*, as in 2:257: *God is the Protector of those who believe*. Joseph says that God is his *Protector in this world and in the Hereafter* since those under God’s Protection are considered His friends (*awliyāʾ*°, a term that derives from the same root as *Protector*), upon whom *no fear shall come* (10:62) and for whom *are glad tidings in the life of this world and in the Hereafter* (10:64). Joseph’s supplication to God, *Take me as a submitter unto Thyself*, is a request to God that he not die except in a state of complete submission to God’s Will (as in 3:102: *And die not except in submission*), and in accordance with the creed of Abraham (see 22:78). For a discussion of the broader meaning of submission (*islām*) in the Quran, see the essay “The Quranic View of Sacred History and Other Religions.”

102 These are among the accounts of the unseen which We reveal unto thee. And thou wert not with them when they decided upon their affair and plotted.

102 This verse, addressed to the Prophet Muhammad, points out that he was not with Joseph’s brothers when they planned what they would do to Joseph (R). The verse thus argues for the miraculous nature of the Prophet’s knowledge, since he was given the unseen details of the story of Joseph without being physically present during its unfolding and, according to Islamic teachings, without learning of it from human teachers or through books (R), since he is considered *the unlettered Prophet* (7:157).

103 And most of mankind, however much thou mightest desire, are not believers.

103 For *most of mankind . . . are not believers*, see 11:17c; 13:1; 40:61.

Elsewhere in the Quran, the Prophet's concern for his people (and, by extension, all of humanity) is addressed (see 9:128, 18:6, 26:3), which is part of the broader Quranic theme that it is only God Who guides and only God Who causes people to believe; see 2:272; 3:20; 3:128–29; 28:56.

104 And thou askest of them no reward for it; it is naught but a reminder for the worlds.

104 For the meaning of this verse, see commentary on 6:90, where the Prophet is instructed to say, *I ask not of you any reward for it. It is naught but a reminder for the worlds.*

105 How many a sign is there in the heavens and on the earth by which they pass; yet they turn away from them!

105 People continuously encounter signs and proofs that indicate the being of their Creator as well as His Wisdom, Power, and Oneness, yet they do not reflect upon the meaning of these signs; nor do they take a lesson from them (Bd); thus 6:157 asks rhetorically, *Who does greater wrong than one who denies the signs of God and turns away from them?* Regarding the variety and significance of God's signs, see the commentary on 45:3–6. More specifically, this verse relates to the previous civilizations and peoples who have passed away and left vestiges behind, from which those who come later are meant to take a lesson, but instead fail to do so (N). Regarding the lessons to be derived from past nations, see 30:9c.

106 And most of them believe not in God, save that they ascribe partners unto Him.

106 It is said that this verse was revealed about the Makkan idolaters, who believed in God but also worshipped other gods alongside Him (K1). For more on ascribing partners to God, see 4:48c. The gods that one might place on a par with God are not limited to physical idols, but can also be other elements that one

“idolizes,” such as one’s desires, power, or ideas (see also 10:28–29c; 25:43; 45:23).

107 Do they feel secure from the coming of an overwhelming punishment from God upon them? Or from the coming of the Hour suddenly, while they are unaware?

107 For the rhetorical question *Do they feel secure?* (regarding God’s Punishment), see also 16:45–47; 17:68–69; 67:16–17. Here the question is about the Makkan idolaters (Ṭs). The *overwhelming punishment* refers to a thunderbolt (JJ, Ṭs) or some kind of enveloping punishment (Bg); *the Hour* refers to the Day of Judgment. For the sudden nature of the arrival of the Last Day and the general state of heedlessness in which it will find most people, see 6:31c; 7:188; 21:40.

108 Say, “This is my way. I call unto God with clear sight—I, and those who follow me. Glory be to God! And I am not among those who ascribe partners unto God.”

108 Here *way* can refer to either the Prophet’s wont (Bg) or the religion he brought (Bg, Z; cf. 16:125). *By clear sight* is meant that by which one can distinguish with certainty between truth and falsehood, namely, certainty (Bg).

109 And We sent none before thee, save men unto whom We sent revelation among the people of the towns. Have they not journeyed upon the earth and observed how those before them fared in the end? And the Abode of the Hereafter is better for those who are reverent. Do you not understand?

109 Some have said that this verse was revealed as a response to the

Makkans' question in 6:8, *Why has not an angel been sent down unto him?* (Q). On the significance of prophets being human beings and speaking the language of their people, see 6:8–9; 11:12; 14:10; 17:94; 18:110; 23:33; 25:7; 35:15; 41:6; 54:24; 14:4c; 14:11c; 64:6c. Many commentators understand the mention of *the people of the towns* to signify that nomads were never chosen to be prophets since town dwellers were, according to the commentators, more knowledgeable and refined (Q, R, Z), and neither were women chosen as prophets (see 16:43c), though some believe that the mention of *men* signifies not gender but that they were human beings, not angels (Z; see 17:94–95c).

For *Have they not journeyed upon the earth and observed how those before them fared in the end?* see 30:9c (see also 12:105c). On the superiority of the Hereafter to this world, see 12:56–57c, although 12:57 mentions the *reward of the Hereafter* rather than the *Abode of the Hereafter*.

110 Till, when the messengers despaired and thought that they were deemed liars, Our Help came unto them, and whosoever We willed was saved. And Our Might shall not be turned back from the guilty people.

110 For the prophets' human reactions to the trials they encountered, see 2:214; 15:97; 21:83; 26:3. For God's exacting vengeance upon the *guilty people*, see 32:22.

111 Certainly in their stories is a lesson for those possessed of intellect. It is not a fabricated account; rather, it is a confirmation of that which came before it, and an elaboration of all things, and a guidance and a mercy for a people who believe.

111 By *their stories* is meant the stories of the messengers mentioned throughout the Quran (JJ). For *those possessed of intellect*, see 5:100c; 38:29c; 39:9c. On the fact that the Quran is not *fabricated*, but rather confirms the scriptures that came before it, see 10:37; cf. commentary on 10:15–17. Like the

Quran itself (see also 16:64, 89), the Torah given to Moses is also described as *an elaboration of all things, and a guidance and a mercy* (see 6:154 and commentary).