

## MARK HILLMER: JOSEPH IN THE QUR'AN

*Briefly told, the Qur'anic Joseph story goes like this:*

Joseph has a dream—only one!—of eleven stars plus the sun and moon bowing down before him. He relates it not to his brothers, as in Genesis, but to his father, who warns him not to tell it to his brothers. His brothers nevertheless determine to kill Joseph. An unnamed brother suggests putting Joseph into a pit rather than killing him. Thereupon they ask their father to let Joseph play with them, promising to protect him. Promptly they put him into a water-filled well (the Genesis pit contains no water) and tell Jacob that a wolf ate him. They sell Joseph for a handful of dirhams (coins).

In Egypt, the governor's wife—Potiphar remains unnamed—tries to seduce Joseph, who, though about to succumb, is dissuaded when he sees a “proof of his Lord.” When Joseph tries to flee, the governor's wife tears his shirt from behind, which becomes a factor in his being judged innocent. To counter the jeers of the women of the city, the governor's wife invites the women in for a meal, giving each a knife. When they see how divinely handsome Joseph is they all cut themselves. Though found innocent, Joseph is nonetheless sent to prison because “it seemed good to them.” In prison he interprets the dreams of the butler and the baker, appending a sermonette on monotheism.

When the king of Egypt (never referred to as pharaoh in sura 12 but so named 74 times elsewhere in the Qur'an) reports his two dreams of seven fat and lean kine and seven green and withered ears of corn, his counsellors are unable to interpret them, calling them “a hotchpotch of nightmares.” In another departure from the biblical text, Joseph interprets the dreams while still in prison. Only after this does the king summon Joseph to the court. The attempted seduction by the governor's wife and the women's cutting of themselves is brought up again. This time Joseph is fully exonerated and set up as a ruler in Egypt.

Joseph's brothers come to him in Egypt for their first visit with no mention of the famine that caused their journey. Joseph sends them back to Canaan with grain plus their returned money and with a request to bring their younger brother when they return. Benjamin is not mentioned by name. When they make the second journey to Egypt, Jacob warns them—unlike Genesis—not to enter the city by the same gate Joseph privately reveals his identity to Benjamin before planting his drinking cup in Benjamin's sack and having him arrested. The eldest brother (not Judah) stands in for Benjamin.

When Jacob is told that Benjamin has been accused of theft, he is reminded of Joseph and renews his mourning for his lost son, much to the disgust of the other sons. On their third

visit Joseph reveals himself to his brothers. Joseph sends home with them a shirt, telling them to put it on Jacob's face to cure his blindness. Jacob clairvoyantly perceives the setting out of the brothers' caravan from Egypt, and the story rapidly moves to its conclusion with Joseph welcoming both his father and his mother (sic!) to Egypt.

Some observations:

1. Though the biblical version undergoes some deletions and additions, the basic story line is present in impressive detail. The Qur'an relates the storyline but remains vague on names. The only characters mentioned by name are Jacob and Joseph. The Bible reader can recognize the roles of Reuben, Simeon, Judah, and Benjamin, but the Qur'an does not name them. Likewise Potiphar and pharaoh are not mentioned but are given other titles. This is what one would expect in the telling and retelling of a story: the events are more memorable than the names.

2. The Qur'an readers consider the story of Joseph enjoyable for itself. The sura begins: "We will relate to thee the fairest of stories in that We have revealed to thee this Koran, though before it thou wast one of the heedless"(12:3). "Fairest" is Arabic *ahsan*, which can also be rendered by "best," "nicest," "loveliest." No other sura is described in this way.

The Qur'an does not utilize the Joseph story as it does other similar material. The Qur'an is mostly homiletical, admonishing against idolatry, encouraging the worship of Allah, and inveighing against those who do not accept Muhammad's preaching. Such paraenetic expansions appear only rarely in the Joseph story:

a. The observation that judgment and knowledge were given Joseph as a reward is accompanied by the theological observation, "Even so we recompense the good-doers" (12:22). ("We" is the qur'anic pronoun commonly used by the deity.)

b. The invective that accompanies Joseph's interpretation of the dreams of the butler and baker is short and mild: "I shall tell you the interpretation...I have forsaken the religion of a folk who believe not in Allah and are disbelievers in the Hereafter. And I have followed the religion of my fathers....O my two fellow-prisoners! Are divers lords better, or Allah the One, the Almighty?" (12:37-39). This is the longest paraenetic expansion within the Joseph story proper.

c. Only at the end of the sura is the Qur'an more expansive, including ten verses of exhortation.

On the other hand, the whole story is used as a parabola for the Prophet's