

# *The Story of Joseph in the Qur'an*

A N E W R E A D I N G



*Dr. Muhammad M. Abu Laylah*

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**A New Reading**

*Dr. Muhammad M. Abu Laylah*

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**Published By:**

*scribe*digital.com

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ISBN 978-1-78041-012-8

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## Acknowledgment

The story of Joseph has often been described as the “story of stories” and is in fact referred to in the Qur'an as the “best” or most “beautiful” of stories. It is a story like no other and encompasses numerous aspects of life: love, jealousy, betrayal, adultery, economics and the incredible capacity to forgive. This book explores these aspects with note that while the story of Joseph is indeed awe-inspiring, its main purpose of revelation is to offer comfort at times of trials and difficulties.

**Scribe Digital** would like to offer thanks and good wishes to Dr. Muhammad Abu Laylah for his great efforts to serve Islam and Muslims and for giving us the opportunity to publish this precious book.

Finally, we supplicate to Allah to make this work of benefit for Islam and Muslims and to forgive our errors and omissions. All praise and thanks are due to Allah, without Whose Help and Guidance nothing can be accomplished.

## Introduction

The Qur'an is the Word of God revealed to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) on a series of occasions over a period of twenty-five years. The Qur'an is divided into 114 chapters, called suras, and they vary in length; the longest sura contains 286 verses, whereas the shortest has only three. The Qur'an is arranged according to a divine plan and not according to any obvious principle, such as the length of the chapters or the chronology or place of revelation or the subject matter.

The Qur'an is a Book that offers remarkable aptitude. It is possible for a seven-year-old child to memorize it all, or for an adult to read it in a day. Imam ash-Shafi'i used to read it twice a day during Ramadan.

Short as it is, thousands, if not millions of scholars around the world have devoted themselves to the study of this book. Some have specialized in its interpretation, others in the causes and occasions of its revelation, others in the sciences based around it, others in its rhetoric, and others in its semantics and vocabulary, others in its parables and anecdotes. Then there are those who have specialized in the different ways of reading the text (*Qira'at*), some in its prophecies, others in its arguments and others in its theology, laws, ethics and so on. The study of the Qur'an is as important today as it was yesterday. No one can claim that the Qur'an has been exhausted as a topic for study and research. On the contrary, the Qur'an still offers unlimited knowledge and is open to unlimited research. The more we progress, the more we realize our need for understanding morality and God's law, that is why it was easy for early Muslim scholars to establish a link between science and

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statements in the Qur'an. The Qur'an has alluded to many scientific facts, in the fields of biology, medicine, genetics, astronomy and physics. The Qur'an has been described as a book whose wonders have never been exhausted. The more one takes from it, the greater, the wider and the deeper it becomes.

It is noteworthy to mention that this presentation of the Qur'an was not meant to give the impression that the Qur'an is the property of scholars and researchers only. It is also an aid to devotion and a guide to practical life. It is everything to Muslims. The Qur'an describes itself as a light, a guide, a spirit and a command from God. It heals mental agonies and frees the mind from universal maladies. It is compared to a life-giving miraculous medicine. It is a sublime text, free of contradictions or corruptions; it is a revelation from God that He sent down via the archangel Gabriel to His Messenger, Muhammad (peace be upon him). Thus, the Qur'an is Divine in provenance, angelic in transmission, prophetic in reception and its further transmission, but human in its usefulness. The Qur'an is miraculous in word and content. It is miraculous for the following reasons:

**First**, it has a unique philosophical construction, unique theoretic presentation, and unique semantics; the Arab people have never failed to understand it. It appeals to man's intellect and fulfills man's greatest longing for verbal elegance. The Arabs described its effect on their souls as magical, miraculous and superhuman.

**Second**, the Qur'an contains the parables and stories of ancient people. The miraculous aspect of this is that Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, was an unlettered

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person, who had no knowledge of these stories before he became a prophet. There were no Christians in Mecca, and the Jews in Medina resided far from the place of his birth. If one suggests that Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, heard the Bible stories from a Christian or a Jew, why then was there not any other person who heard them in the same way and passed them on to his fellow Arabs? If Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, had had human sources, his opponents could have identified them.

The Jews attempted to discredit Prophet Muhammad by challenging him on various points. Once they asked him about the apocryphal story of the cave, and he said, "I will tell you tomorrow". However, he was not able to keep his promise because God did not reveal the story to him as he expected. After three days, God did reveal the story, having withheld it because Muhammad had said, "I will tell you ..." forgetting to say "God willing", [*And never say of anything, "I shall do such and such thing tomorrow. Except (with the saying), "If Allah will!" And remember your Lord when you forget and say: "It may be that my Lord guides me unto a nearer way of truth than this."*] (Al-Kahf: 23-24)

**Third**, the Qur'an contains prophecies and foretellings about events in our world among men and nations. Many of these miracles have happened exactly as foretold by the Qur'an.

**Fourth**, the Qur'an revealed a lot of nature's secrets before they were known to scientists, and also revealed secrets of the human nature, the human body and human psychology.

**Fifth**, the Qur'an spread miraculously quickly among non-Arabs in Asia and Africa, and now in America and

Europe. Though those people do not speak the language of the Qur'an, they are still moved by it. This Divine Book has greatly influenced the life of millions of people around the globe and reshaped their society.

**Sixth**, the Qur'an continues to exist in its original divine form, and the increasing interest in it, and the continued enthusiasm to live according to its teaching prove that it is not an archaic book of mere historical interest. The Qur'an stands the test of time. Needs have changed, society has evolved but the Qur'an still answers man's needs in modern times. It meets the challenges of its secular detractors. Perhaps another aspect of its miraculous character is the fact that the Qur'an is the only book among the sacred books whose teachings have been used to organize a secular state, whose teachings have been put into practice by individuals, by nations and universally. It was put into practice both during the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad and after his death. Another miraculous aspect of this book is that it binds the Muslim nation (*Ummah*) together in a spirit of brotherhood. One may ask whether it is the Qur'an that has safeguarded the Muslim nation, or the Muslim nation that has safeguarded the Qur'an? In my view, it is the Qur'an that guarded the Muslim nation, and Allah has guarded the Qur'an. Almighty Allah says in the Qur'an, [*Verily We: It is We Who have sent down the Dhikr (i.e. the Qur'an) and surely, We will guard it (from corruption).*] (Al-Hijr: 9)

**Seventh**, the Qur'an miraculously satisfies all forms of human inclinations. The Qur'an is not the first divine book but it is the last, and it reiterates the basic teachings of the previously revealed books. Jews and Christians recognize familiar elements in it. Moreover, the Qur'an does not

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satisfy only intellectuals, philosophers, wise men but also the man in the street. That is why the Qur'an spread so rapidly among all classes of people, Arabs and non-Arabs alike.

Allah's Light and Spirit are transmitted in the words and phrases of the Qur'an. The Qur'an is melodious and melodic and reaches the depth of the human soul. Recitation of this Book makes one feel that Allah is directly speaking to him. The Qur'an came from heaven to earth, in order to be near to man, so that he might hear it with his ears, keep it in his heart, and write it with his hands. A Muslim has no excuse for failing to obey the word of God and adapt his life and expectations according to its teachings and guidance.

Allah's Prophets and Messengers were sent to propagate the Divine Revelation. They all propagated the same principles of faith and made it available to all people. The Qur'an tells us that the message of all the Prophets should be followed without making any distinction between them.

Allah the Almighty says,

*[Say you: We believe in Allah, and the revelation given to us, and to Ibrahim, Isma'il, Ishaq, Ya`qub, and the Tribes, and that given to Musa and `Isa, and that given to (all) prophets from their Lord: We make no difference between one and another of them: And we bow to Allah (in Islam).]*

(Al-Baqarah: 136)

This book recounts the stories of some Prophets and focuses especially on the story of Prophet Yusuf for it contains a number of moving incidents, which underline

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moral and ethical lessons. This story depicts astonishing lessons for man throughout the different stages of his life: young and old, weak and strong, and poor and rich.

Finally, may Allah make this work purely for His Face and a means of meeting Him in the Gardens of Bliss.

*Dr. Muhammad Abu Laylah*

## **Prophets in the Qur'an**

### **Works and Words**

### Prophets in the Qur'an

To give a complete account of this subject, two questions should be posed at the very beginning. The first question is: What is the definition of a Prophet? It is important to distinguish between real Prophets and false prophets like those who claimed so in the past or even in our present time. The second question is: Why should we concern ourselves with Prophets? What is the significance of Prophets to us? Why should we scrutinize them, and study their way of life? These are the questions that constitute the vortex from which the whole subject emerges.

Regarding the second question, it may be said that we need to concern ourselves with Prophets because they were the first educators, who were trained by Allah to educate, teach and guide His people on earth. The Prophets educated the society as a whole, children, youths, adults, men and women. The Prophets had their own teaching techniques that are not necessarily like the ones applied nowadays.

There is no doubt that they had Divine Guidance and special human qualities that enabled them to improve society, and perfect people's social qualities. The Prophets as educators still represent our model-examples in life and should influence our minds and thinking. Every piece of literature and philosophy we have owes its existence to their endeavors and efforts.

Al-Ghazali, a great Muslim scholar and sufi, asserted that Greek philosophy owes much of its excellence to the Prophets whose words had been quoted by the Greek philosophers. According to the Islamic belief, Allah sends to every nation its own Prophets and messengers. There is no

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exclusivity in Islam; that there are no chosen nations and unchosen ones. Due to the arrogance of modern man, his ideas and paradigms might overcast the examples of the Prophets and their teachings which, however, still have a great effect on contemporary society (and its behavior). The Prophets are still with us. They are still our models when pursuing a spiritual life, and perfecting the moral behavior.

Islam encompasses the Divine teachings of all Prophets. Their stories are told in the Qur'an, Almighty Allah says,

*[We reveal unto you (Muhammad) the best of stories through Our Revelations unto you, of this Qur'an.]*

(Yusuf: 3)

And,

*[All that We reveal to you of the stories of the messengers - with it We make firm your heart: in them there comes to you the Truth, as well as an exhortation and a message of remembrance to those who believe.]*

(Hud: 120)

And,

*[Indeed in their stories, there a lesson for men of understanding. It (the Qur'an) is not a forged statement but a confirmation of the Allah's existing Books [the Torah (Tawrah), the Gospel (Injil) and other Scriptures of Allah] and a detailed explanation of everything and a guide and a Mercy for the people who believe.]*

(Yusuf: 111)

There is no doubt that Allah's Prophets bear no resemblance to the soothsayers of pagan religions. The soothsayers are dead, and their influence died with them.

But, the Prophets who brought divine messages cannot be lost from our collective conscience until the world itself has come to an end. All Prophets were sent by Allah, and all of them paved the way for people to come closer to Allah. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, "*The Prophets are paternal brothers; their mothers are different, but their religion is one.*" This means that each Prophet had his own individual character and his own particular mission. They were like children who share the same father but have different mothers. They all have a father in common i.e. the religion brought from Allah. Their mothers are their particular distinctive *Shari`ah*.

Almighty Allah says,

*[The Messenger (Mubammad) believes in what has been sent down to him from his Lord, and (so do) the believers. Each one believes in Allah, His Angels, His Books, and His Messengers. They say, "We make no distinction between one and another of His Messengers" - and they say, "We hear, and we obey. (We seek) Your Forgiveness, our Lord, and to You is the return (of all)."]*

(Al-Baqarah: 285)

And,

*[Say (O Muslims), "We believe in Allah and that which has been sent down to us and that which has been sent down to Abraham (Ibrahim), Ishmael (Isma`il), Isaac (Is-haq), Jacob (Ya`qub), and to al-Asbat (the twelve sons of Jacob), and that which has been given to Moses (Musa) and Jesus (Isa), and that which has been given to the Prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him we have submitted (in Islam)."]*

(Al-Baqarah: 136)

Our concern with Prophets is central to Muslim's belief in Islam. Whichever country Muslims may live in, he teaches his children about the Prophets of God and about other religious communities, Christians and Jews in particular.

This brings us to our original question, what is the definition of prophecy? Who is a Prophet? According to the Arabic language, there are two words that refer to a Prophet: *Nabiyy* and *Rasul*. We also have titles, which can be used as names or as descriptions, such as *al-Mustafa* (The chosen one), or *Nadbeer*, (The one who warns) or *Basbeer*, (Bringer of Good tidings), etc. As for the English language, we can say "prophet", "messenger" or "emissary" of God.

In Islam, "Prophet" means an infallible and freeman, perfect in physique and in spirit, well-descended, chosen by God and honored with His revelations to guide His people.

The Prophet is enabled by Allah to work miracles, which constitute an evidence for Divine support of his prophethood. These miracles identify the Divinity of any Prophet and his message. This is the broad meaning of a "Prophet" according to Islam. A Prophet usually begins his mission in his forties. The exceptions are Abraham, John the Baptist, and Jesus, who were raised to prophethood at an earlier age.

According to Islamic theology, there are some differences between Prophet (*Nabiyy*) and Messenger (*Rasul*). A Messenger is commanded to deliver a Message. A Prophet, unlike a Messenger, is not necessarily required to work among people carrying a specific message. For example, Sarah, Zacharias (*Zakariyya*) and Mary (*Maryam*)

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were not asked to work among people or to deliver any divine message, but they were Prophets or Prophetess in the sense that they communicated with God through angels, and experienced miracles.

Muslims do not discriminate between any of the Prophets that are mentioned in the Qur'an. They believe in all of them equally, and they should say, in the words of the Qur'an,

*[We listened and obeyed, O Allah, grant us Your forgiveness. We shall all return to You.]*

(Al-Baqarah: 285)

And,

*[Those of you who believe in what has been revealed to you and what has been revealed to you before you, and believe truly in the Hereafter, are truly guided by Allah and will find true victory.]*

(Al-Baqarah: 4-5)

And when God listed some of the Prophets in the Qur'an, He says, *[All these We have guided and favored.]* (Maryam: 58) Although we respect all Prophets equally, Allah did make differences between them. The following verse from the sura of al-Baqarah shows that all Prophets are equal, but not identical.

Allah says,

*[These are the Prophets. Some excel above the others. Some We have spoken to, some We have raised up - We have given Jesus the son of Mary clear proof of sovereignty, and supported him with the Holy Spirit.]*

(Al-Baqarah: 253)

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Our aim here is not to discuss the story of every Prophet. We will only concentrate on the position of the Prophets in history, their influence on our life, their authority, and the continuing importance of their message, stressing the urgent need to learn from them.

Some irreligious people try to argue that Prophets came with the purpose of spreading terror, division and war between people, but this is not true. They came rather to spread unity, security and peace among people to perfect behavior and morals.

I shall select a few of the Prophets to comment on. The accounts of the different Prophets in the Qur'an vary in length and importance, which is aligned in perfect harmony with our human nature. Some of us like to read a long story, others prefer a short one, and others seek the moral lesson from the story.

Each Prophet in the Qur'an came with a message that answered the needs of his people, although all of them preached the same basic message; the existence of God and the necessity of obeying and worshiping Him. They share the same moral values, which present the core of our human heritage.

The Qur'an concentrated on each Prophet's struggle against corrupt people and forces of evil, on their actions, and their reception by the people of their time. Despite the few historical details about the Prophets, the Qur'an does provide the necessary information about Prophets that leaves no doubt or confusion about the historicity of any of them. Each Prophet is put into the context of his time and events, whether historically or personally, so that there is no sense of isolation. Each Prophet actively engaged in

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working towards establishing equity and justice among his people.

The Qur'an provides facts about the Prophets where there is no exaggeration or fantasy in the accounts. In the works of the Prophets there is the excitement of their minds and emotions.

The Qur'an says, [*We narrate their story truthfully.*] (Al-Kahf: 13)

And, [*Allah tells the truth, and He decides best,*] (Al-An'am: 57)

And, [*We relate to you the best of stories.*] (Yusuf: 3)

The accounts of the Prophets in the Qur'an have a noble aim and a virtuous purpose. This fact was mentioned in the sura of Yusuf (Joseph) where Almighty Allah says,

*[Indeed in their stories, there a lesson for men of understanding. It (the Qur'an) is not a forged statement but a confirmation of the Allah's existing Books [the Torah (Tawrah), the Gospel (Injil) and other Scriptures of Allah] and a detailed explanation of everything and a guide and a Mercy for the people who believe.]*

(Yusuf: 111)

This is a concluding verse at the end of the sura of Yusuf. In the Qur'an, the story of the Prophet aims at setting the heart at peace, strengthening it, relieving its troubles, and sharpening one's sense of the value of time so as not to waste it.

Almighty Allah says,

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*[Tell them the history of the men of long ago, so that they may take thought.]*

(Al-A`raf: 176)

And,

*[All that We reveal to you of the stories of the messengers - with it We make firm your heart: in them there comes to you the Truth, as well as an exhortation and a message of remembrance to those who believe.]*

(Hud: 120)

The stories of the Prophets in the Qur'an represent an important element in Allah's Teachings. They are central to Allah's Plan and Law, where God's aim is to direct and guide people to the right path, and bring them happiness. More important still, the stories of the Prophets show the relationship between Allah's Prophets on earth, and the Oneness of their Source. That is why each Prophet spoke of the preceding Prophets, their deeds and their sayings. Allah, the Almighty says,

*[O you assembly of jinn and mankind! "Did not there come to you Messengers from amongst you, reciting unto you My Verses and warning you of the meeting of this Day of yours?"]*

(Al-An`am: 130)

Islam also stresses that it stands firmly on two bases: reason and revelation. There have been disputes about which is more important, reason or the revelation given to the Prophets. We believe that reason and revelation both have come from God, and are both under His control. One may ask which has come before the other, reason or revelation (prophethood)?

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Before answering this question, it is obvious that man needs both, reason and revelation. Getting support from the story of the creation of Adam, I would put reason (intellect) first, before revelation. The intellectual Adam was created, but Adam did not use his mind until revelation came to him from Allah, teaching him every thing about his life on earth. Thus, he was set in a higher position than that of the angels, not merely because he had a mind, but because of the knowledge which Allah taught him. Before the revelation we may venture to say that Adam's mind was like an automaton, a perfect machine, created for a certain task, but not yet switched on, not yet activated according to plan, and still without an instruction manual of how to repair the machine if necessary. To continue this simile, we might say that what a Prophet supplies for the human mind is like the fuel for a machine. A Prophet supplied the blueprint and the instruction manual for the human machine.

I could compare man and prophethood to the eye and light. Each is necessary to the other. The eye cannot see without light. Light cannot be effective for vision without the eye.

There are other things to be learned from Adam's story. Adam's body was created from dust, and God breathed into that body the spirit (*Ruh*) that made him human; made him a spiritual and rational being. Eve was made from his body, and then all of us have descended from the two of them, Adam and Eve. Allah created Adam according to His Plan, and set up a relationship with him through the spirit He breathed into. Adam was created from dust gathered from every corner of the earth, so that men would be able to live in every climate, from the frozen wastelands to the tropical deserts. Allah willed to make man His representative on