

With the Name of Allah, All-Merciful, Most Merciful

LONGING – Islamic Texts

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Translation of the Qur'an adapted from Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali

Themes of the Texts

Surah Yusuf (Joseph) is unique amongst Qur'anic surahs in that no other medium-length or long surah is devoted almost entirely to telling one story. Indeed, the surah says right at the beginning that this is “the most beautiful of stories,” and the surah has a rhythm and sequence of moods that makes it a favourite amongst dedicated reciters.

In a lovely children's retelling, it is known as the story of the “Three Shirts.” The last of these shirts is the one by which Prophet Jacob regains his eyesight after losing it out of sorrow and longing for his son, Prophet Joseph. Jacob's moving prayer in the first half of ayah 86 is often repeated by Muslims when in distress or anguish. In a famous tradition, the second caliph of Islam, Umar bin al-Khattab, recited this surah as he led the prayers and sobbed so loudly as he repeated this ayah that his weeping could be heard at the back of the congregation.

Surah al-Qasas (The Story) is the only one that comes close to rivalling Joseph as a single-story surah. This one is about Moses and Pharaoh. The key ayah that is related to the theme is no. 10.

Points to Consider

1. What kind of love does Jacob have for Joseph, especially in the light of ayah 13 ?
2. Is putting up with censure by others a necessary test in the endurance of true love and longing, as illustrated by the reaction of Jacob's other sons?
3. In The Story, 7, what is the effect of the statement, “when you hast fears about him, cast him into the river,” upon the reciter and listener?
4. In The Story, 10, what is the nature of the void in the heart of Moses' mother?

Text 1: *Surah Yusuf* (Chapter: Joseph, 12:11-13 and 80-87), Meccan

11. They said: “O our father! why do you not trust us with Joseph,- seeing we are indeed his sincere well-wishers?”

12. “Send him with us tomorrow to enjoy himself and play, and we shall take every care of him.”

13. (Jacob) said: “Really it saddens me that you should take him away: (further,) I fear lest the wolf should devour him while you attend not to him.”

... **80.** Now when they saw no hope of his (yielding), they held a conference in private. The leader among them said: “Know you not that your father did take an oath from you in God’s name, and how, before this, you did fail in your duty with Joseph? Therefore I will not leave this land until my father permits me, or Allah commands me; and He is the best to command.

81. “Turn back to your father, and say, ‘O our father! Behold! Your son committed theft! We bear witness only to what we know, and we could not well guard against the unseen!

82. ‘Ask at the town where we have been and the caravan in which we returned, and (you will find) we are indeed telling the truth’.”

83. Jacob said: “Nay, but you have yourselves contrived a story (good enough) for you. So beautiful patience is most fitting (for me). Maybe Allah will bring them (back) all to me (in the end). For He is indeed full of knowledge and wisdom.”

84. And he turned away from them, and said: “How great is my grief for Joseph!”^a And his eyes became white with sorrow, and he fell into silent melancholy.

85. They said: “By Allah, (never) will you cease to remember Joseph until you reach the last extremity of illness, or until you die!”

86. He said: “I only complain of my distraction and anguish to Allah, and I know from Allah that which you know not ...

87. “O my sons! Go and enquire about Joseph and his brother, and never give up hope of God’s Soothing Mercy: truly no one despairs of God’s Soothing Mercy, except those who have no faith.”

^a A phrase of magnificent, alliterative eloquence in the original. “How great is my grief!” is *ya’asafa* and Joseph is *yusufa*.

Text 2: *Surah al-Qasas* (Chapter: The Story, 28:1-13), Meccan

In the Name of God, All-Merciful, Most Merciful

- 1.** T.S.M. **2.** These are Verses of the Book that makes (things) clear.
- 3.** We rehearse to you some of the story of Moses and Pharaoh in Truth, for people who believe. **4.** Truly Pharaoh elated himself in the land and broke up its people into sections, depressing a small group among them: their sons he killed, but he kept alive their females: for he was indeed a maker of mischief.
- 5.** And We wished to be Gracious to those who were being depressed in the land, to make them leaders (in Faith) and make them heirs,
- 6.** To establish a firm place for them in the land, and to show Pharaoh, Haman^b, and their armies, at their hands, the very things against which they were taking precautions.
- 7.** So We sent this inspiration to the mother of Moses: “Suckle (your child), but when you have fears about him, cast him into the river, but fear not nor grieve: for We shall restore him to you, and We shall make him one of Our apostles.”
- 8.** Then the people of Pharaoh picked him up (from the river): (It was intended) that (Moses) should be to them an adversary and a cause of sorrow: for Pharaoh and Haman and (all) their armies were men of sin.
- 9.** The wife of Pharaoh said: “(Here is) joy of the eye, for me and for you: kill him not. It may be that he will be of use to us, or we may adopt him as a son.” And they perceived not (what they were doing)!
- 10.** But there came to be a void in the heart of the mother of Moses: She was going almost to disclose his (case), had We not strengthened her heart^c (with faith), so that she might remain a (firm) believer.
- 11.** And she said to the sister of (Moses), “Follow him” so she (the sister) watched him in the character of a stranger. And they knew not.
- 12.** And we ordained that he refused suck at first, until (his sister came up and) said: “Shall I point out to you the people of a house that will nourish and bring him up for you and be sincerely attached to him?”
- 13.** Thus did We restore him to his mother, that her eye might be comforted, that she might not grieve, and that she might know that the promise of Allah is true: but most of them do not understand.

^b Pharaoh's chief vizier or minister.

^c Literally, “tied her heart” or “put restraints on her heart.”

Commentary

Jacob's longing for Joseph and that of Moses' mother^d for him are both metaphors for the soul's longing for God during separation.

Joseph, 13: Many translations miss the word, "further" or its equivalent although it is obvious in the original and conveys the important meaning that simply being parted from Joseph was enough to cause Jacob great grief.

Joseph, 82: "Ask the town," clearly means, "Ask the *people of the town*." However, this ayah has given rise to considerable controversy amongst the commentators over whether or not this metaphor is included in the "literal meaning" of the Qur'an and of the Arabic language in general. The controversy is around the level of literalism that is to be applied in understanding the Qur'an, since every word in it is Divinely-arranged. Why didn't God simply say, "Ask the people of the town" ?

The Story, 7: If you fear for a baby's safety, the last thing you are likely to do is throw him into the river, even if he has a basket for a boat. The almost paradoxical nature of this command evokes the importance of total trust in God. For me, it is an example of the "heart-stopping paradoxes" that some Sufis speak about. A modern version of this command might be, "When in trouble, take the plunge and don't worry about it – God will look after you!"

The Story, 10: Most commentators understandably take the "void in the heart" to refer to Moses' mother's total distress at separation from her suckling babe, albeit due to her willing submission to God's command in this matter. There is also a mystical reading of this ayah: Moses' mother's heart is void of everything besides God; she would burst with the proclamation of the ultimate Divine Secret, were it not for God strengthening and restraining her heart, that she may be a true believer and not divulge the Secret.

The state of Moses' mother's heart in ayahs 7 and 10 gives an indication of her exalted spiritual station; she is a true saint who endures considerable emotional tests with love, faith and contentment.

The Story, 9: Pharaoh's wife (traditionally named Asiya) exclaims that Moses will be a source of joy to her and her husband. This is true in the short term, as they have a baby boy in the household. But the truth of her assertion is long-term also in her case, as she has faith in Moses, unlike her husband, and is thus saved from his unbelief and admitted into God's everlasting pleasure, as detailed elsewhere in the Qur'an (66:11). There is even a mystical view, usually dismissed as heretical, that her assertion, as a prayer, is true also for the Pharaoh, who too achieves salvation and redemption, along with Satan! This teaching is attributed to the great Sufis Hallaj and Ibn 'Arabi, both of whom were, and remain, extremely-controversial within the Muslim community.

^d According to Islamic tradition, her name was Safura, but she is not named in the Qur'an, where the only woman mentioned by name in the entire Scripture is Maryam (Mary), mother of 'Isa (Jesus).