

What is *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān*?

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In an attempt to understand a well-known though often unexamined exegetical principle, this article offers a reading of the story of Joseph in light of two Quranic passages, namely 39:23 and, most importantly, 95:4-6. What links these texts is the concept of beauty. In 39:23, the Quran is referred to as “the most beautiful discourse,” while 95:4 says that human beings were created in “the most beautiful stature.” At the same time, Sūrat Yūsuf is spoken of as being “the most beautiful of stories” (12:3). We thus have the most beautiful discourse, which contains the most beautiful of stories, and all of this is for the benefit of God’s creatures, who are created in the most beautiful of statures.

Yet 95:5-6 of the Quran also states that human beings have been cast to “the lowest of the low,” but that such a state will not pertain to those who believe and act righteously. Looking at the story of Joseph with specific reference to 95:4-6, and taking the story’s different characters as so many aspects of the self, we are presented with a vivid “history” of the human soul: recounted in the most beautiful of stories, the human being, who is at first created in the most beautiful of statures, then descends into the lower states of his own soul, only to recover his beautiful nature by holding fast to the path of belief and righteousness. While challenging some of the prevalent paradigms in the field of Quranic studies, the approach taken here will also seek to outline the usefulness of some heretofore under-appreciated hermeneutical devices when engaging the Quran and its interpretation.

Introduction

My point of departure in this article will be the classical principle which says that some parts of the Quran explain other parts of the Quran (*al-Qur'ān yufassiru ba'duhu ba'dan*).¹

Now, what does this actually mean? I do not wish to delve into an historical inquiry concerning the origins of this notion. Suffice it to say that the idea that parts of the Quran explain other parts of the Quran has always been a basic given amongst Muslims. And, it seems quite clear to me, we can find the same operational principle amongst the readers of any text, be it sacred or secular, although it can be argued that readers of sacred texts would be more committed to such a position for both practical and doctrinal reasons.

In his *Muqaddima fi uṣūl al-tafsīr*, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) offers a perfectly logical justification for this practice with respect to the Quran:

* This is a significantly modified version of a previously-published article: “The Quranic Story of Joseph as a ‘History’ of the Human Soul,” *The Maghreb Review* 40, no. 4 (2015): 280-288.

¹ For a general treatment of this principle, see Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), ch. 12.

Were a questioner to ask, ‘What is the soundest method of explaining the Quran (*tafsir*)?,’ it would be answered, ‘The soundest method in this regard is for the Quran to be explained by the Quran (*yufassaru al-Qur’ān bi’l-Qur’ān*), since what is generalized in one context is explained elsewhere, and what is condensed in one context is expounded upon elsewhere.’²

Operationally, this means that in order to understand a word or a phrase which is undefined in one part of the Quran, one must look elsewhere in the Quran for clarification. For example, in verse one of *Sūra* 102, it says, “*Vying for increase distracts you.*”³ But what exactly does “vying for increase” (*takāthur*) mean? The only other instance in which this verbal noun is used in the Quran is in *Sūra* 57, verse 20: *Know that the life of this world is but play, diversion, ornament, mutual boasting among you, and vying for increase (takāthur) in property and children.* 57:20 therefore tells us that the “vying for increase” in question here is that which involves “property and children.” Thus, when 102:1 says that vying for increase distracts human beings, it means to say that they are distracted from their true purpose in life on account of their competing with others in accumulating property and offspring.

This principle not only extends to the use of words and phrases, but should also hold true for clusters of key Quranic ideas, concepts, and themes. Yet we normally do not think of *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān bi’l-Qur’ān* in this way, and the question is, why? I am sure that many would have no problem with applying some kind of literary theory to the Quran, as has been done recently in Quranic studies with respect to “ring theory,”⁴ and often with mixed results. But this, as I see it, is often a second-order level of understanding, since it takes a pre-existing set of criteria that has worked successfully with other forms of literature and then grafts this onto understanding the Quran. Now, what if we were to take the *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān bi’l-Qur’ān* principle seriously, or, should I say, *absolutely* seriously? I would suggest that if we were to do so, multiple layers of correspondences within the text of the Quran would begin to emerge in a way that would defy any neat theoretical categorizations, and which would also give us a much deeper understanding of the Quran *on its own terms*.

It should be noted that I am not going to employ the *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān bi’l-Qur’ān* principle in any new fashion. In many ways, what we call “Sufi *tafsīr*” or “mystical exegesis” (both misleading characterizations) already proceeds along these lines. The same applies to some of the major authors within the Islamic tradition, such as ‘Ayn al-Qudāt (d.

² Ibn Taymiyya, *Muqaddima fi uṣūl al-tafsīr*, ed. ‘Adnān Zarzūr (Kuwait: Dār al-Qur’ān al-Karīm, 1972), 93. Cf. the translation of most of this passage in Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur’an*, 160. Incidentally, this text and the discussion in which it occurs is reworked by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūfī (d. 1505) into the relevant section of his *Itqān*. See Suyūfī, *Al-Itqān fi ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*, ed. Khālid al-‘Aṭṭār (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 2010), 2:548.

³ Translations from the Quran are taken from *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner Dagli, Maria Dakake, Joseph Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom (New York: HarperOne, 2015).

⁴ See Raymond Farrin, *Structure and Qur’anic Interpretation: A Study of Symmetry and Coherence in Islam’s Holy Text* (Ashland: White Cloud Press, 2014).

1131), Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240), and Rūmī (1273). What some observers have found to be incoherent garble in their writings is actually perfectly coherent, and very much anchored in a Qurano-centric view of things. Essentially, what all of these authors share in common is that they are, first and foremost, doing *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi'l-Qur'ān* in the broadest terms possible.

I will here relate this intertextual principle to two sections of the Quran, namely the story of Joseph (12:3-101) and parts of *Sūrat al-Tīn*, (95:4-6). More specifically, an attempt will be made to demonstrate that the Quranic story of Joseph serves as a perfect “commentary” upon the relevant verses of *Sūrat al-Tīn*, with respect to both *structure* and *meaning*. But to see the story of Joseph in this light, one must assume a symbolic perspective (which is also rooted in the Quran) as opposed to the more insightful literary and dramatic approaches that are commonly applied to the story.⁵ My approach to the story of Joseph is thus informed by and somewhat akin to the more “esoteric” interpretations it has traditionally received in texts of Sufism and Islamic philosophy.⁶

Some Preparatory Remarks

Surah 95:4-6 reads as follows: *Truly We created man in the most beautiful stature (95:4), then We cast him to the lowest of the low (95:5), save those who believe and perform righteous deeds; for theirs shall be a reward unceasing (95:6)*. A common explanation of 95:4 is that human beings were created in the image of God, in accordance with the Prophetic saying, “God created Adam in His form.”⁷ And 95:5 can be interpreted as the general state of disbelief from which only those mentioned in 95:6 are excluded.⁸

According to the great philosopher-mystic Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 1274), another way to understand 95:4-6 is that, as the self, created in the divine image, enters the downward flow of the cycle of existence, it becomes trapped in it (i.e., *the lowest of the low*). Yet only a few are able to escape this trap, thereby ascending the circle of existence and returning to their original

⁵ See, in particular, Anthony Johns, “Joseph in the Qur’ān: Dramatic Dialogue, Human Emotion and Prophetic Wisdom,” *Islamochristiana* 7 (1981): 29-55; Todd Lawson, “Typological Figuration and the Meaning of ‘Spiritual’: The Qur’anic Story of Joseph,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 132, no. 2 (2012): 221-244; Mustansir Mir, “Irony in the Qur’ān: A Study of the Story of Joseph,” in *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur’an*, ed. Issa Boullata (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000), 173-187; Mir, “The Qur’anic Story of Joseph: Plot, Themes, and Characters,” *The Muslim World* 76, no. 1 (1986): 1-15; James Morris, “Dramatizing the Sura of Joseph: An Introduction to the Islamic Humanities,” *Journal of Turkish Studies* 18 (1994): 201-224.

⁶ Some representative materials and pertinent secondary scholarship can be found in, s.v. Asghar Dadbeh, “Joseph i.: In Persian Literature” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, online edition, 2012, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/joseph-i-in-persian-literature>, and Annabel Keeler, “Joseph ii.: In Qur’anic Exegesis,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, online edition, 2012, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/joseph-ii-in-quranic-exegesis>. One may also consult Paul Nwyia, “Un cas d’exégèse soufie: l’Histoire de Joseph,” in *Mélanges offerts à Henry Corbin*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Tehran: McGill University, 1977), 407-423 and my commentary upon *Sūra* 12 in *The Study Quran*.

⁷ This tradition is found in the standard sources. See, for example, Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī, *al-Ṣaḥīḥ* (N.p.: Maṭābi‘ al-Shu‘ab, 1958-1959), *Isti’dhān* 1.

⁸ These points are taken from Joseph Lumbard’s commentary upon 95:4-6 in *The Study Quran*.

state in the divine image.⁹ It is this more metaphysical reading of 95:4-6 with which we will be working.

Taking the story of Joseph's different characters as so many symbols of the self, we will see how this tale presents us with a vivid "history" of the human soul, from its origin, to its fall, and then to its return to its source. However, we are not here taken through the life of just any human soul; rather, the "history" in question is concerned with that soul which has attained perfection. This is precisely the journey of the soul that is recounted in 95:4-6. The story of Joseph is, therefore, a symbolic representation and dramatization of 95:4-6.¹⁰ This kind of approach largely hinges on what Maria Dakake calls a "circular" reading of history in the Quran — that is, where the end of the account is already contained in the beginning, and where the remainder of the story presents us with a gradual unfolding of the tale, taking us from its point of origin (*mabda'*) to its point of return (*ma'ād*).¹¹

The Story of Joseph

The story of Joseph in Quran 12:3-101 corresponds to Genesis 37:1–46:7, but with a number of important differences.¹² The Quranic account can be summarized as follows. Joseph (who will soon become a prophet) discloses a special dream he had to his father, the prophet Jacob, wherein eleven stars, the sun, and moon prostrate before him (12:4). Jacob understands the dream to indicate Joseph's being chosen by God (12:5). He then admonishes his son not to convey his dream to his other brothers (12:6), who are exceedingly jealous of him (12:8). Meanwhile, the brothers plot to be rid of Joseph and convince Jacob to allow Joseph to go with them on a leisurely outing (12:9-14). Once in their care, Joseph is cast by them into a well (12:15). The brothers return to Jacob, presenting him with a concocted story of Joseph's death and also bringing forth some false evidence to corroborate their account, but Jacob does not believe them (12:16-18). Joseph is eventually rescued by a caravan (12:19) and purchased by a high-ranking Egyptian viceroy (12:21).

While Joseph is under the viceroy's care, his wife falls in love with him and attempts to seduce him, but Joseph does not succumb to her advances (12:23-25). After false accusations before the viceroy (12:25) and Joseph's self-defense (12:26), it becomes clear that Joseph was innocent (12:27-28). Yet, amidst widespread rumors amongst the women of Egypt concerning what had transpired between Joseph and the viceroy's wife (12:30) and her confronting them (12:31-32), Joseph is put into prison (12:35). In prison, Joseph's virtues are recognized amongst his prison mates, and they thus seek his interpretation of their dreams (12:36). Joseph obliges (12:37, 41), and this incident eventually serves as a catalyst for his being exonerated, released from prison, and appointed to high office in Egyptian society (12:43-56).

⁹ See the text translated in William Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought*, ed. Mohammed Rustom, Atif Khalil, and Kazuyo Murata (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 128-129.

¹⁰ This should not come as a surprise, since these relevant verses from *Sūra* 95 are themselves informed by the wider Quranic worldview concerning the origin, fall, and return of human beings in general.

¹¹ Dakake, "Qur'anic Conceptions of Religious History: Linear, Cyclical, or Circular," forthcoming.

¹² It can be noted here that Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an*, chap. 11, contains a useful comparative study of the Quranic and Biblical accounts of the story of Joseph.

In the face of a major agrarian crisis, Joseph's brothers come to Egypt, seeking provisions, all the while unaware that the person in charge of the food rations is none other than Joseph, who recognizes them but is not recognized by them (12:58). This encounter with his brothers allows Joseph to put into place an ingenious plan (12:59-82) whereby Jacob is informed of Joseph's whereabouts (12:83-86). After Jacob sends the brothers back to Egypt (12:87), Joseph confronts them (12:88-90). The brothers acknowledge their wrongdoing against him (12:91), and Joseph forgives them (12:92). Joseph then invites all of his family to come to stay with him (12:93). After his parents enter Egypt (12:99) and he honours them, Joseph's parents and his brothers all prostrate before him, thereby fulfilling the dream which he had at the beginning of the story (12:100).

A Symbolic Reading

With the basic outline of 95:4-6 and the story of Joseph in place, we shall now turn to our symbolic reading of the tale. Joseph represents the human self or the soul in its terrestrial or fallen state, which is a natural and necessary aspect of the life of any human being. What the "self" is in Islamic thought would itself require a lengthy inquiry. Suffice it to say here that by "self" I simply mean what we normally identify in Islamic texts as the human being as such, namely the inward nature of a person. We can also refer to the self (or, more commonly, aspects of the self) as the spirit (*rūḥ*) or heart (*qalb*), but these two terms need to be situated against the backdrop of a number of complex cosmological and metaphysical doctrines.¹³ Thus, for purposes of clarity and consistency, we will only employ the terms "self" and "soul" here with reference to the human being in all of its states.

As a symbol of the human soul, Joseph first discloses his dream to his father Jacob (12:4). As will become clear in due course, we can understand Jacob's function in the story here as corresponding to human intelligence, namely a person's ability to discern the nature of things on a deep and essential level (as opposed to the more general quality of ratiocination or cognition). We shall return to the meaning of Joseph's dream once its actualization comes about at the end of the story, but in the mean time, it should be noted that the skill Joseph will eventually learn is *ta'wīl*, namely the ability to interpret dreams or what the Quran calls *the interpretation of events* (12:6). *Ta'wīl* indeed refers to the process of interpretation, but it literally denotes the idea of taking something back to its origin. Thus, *ta'wīl* in Islamic sources is often understood to refer to esoteric scriptural exegesis, that is, the uncovering of the original and inner dimension of the outward form of the Quran. By extension, it is seen as the ability to return to the original meaning of any event and circumstance. Applied to the human being, *ta'wīl* refers to the ability to grasp the original nature of the self, or what we would more generally call "the science of the soul." Therefore, Jacob's words in 12:6 to Joseph, *Thus shall thy Lord choose thee, and teach thee the interpretation of events, and complete His Blessing upon thee*, tell us that Joseph will eventually learn the science of the soul, and this acquired knowledge will clearly be a result of God's having chosen him.

¹³ For the spirit and heart, see Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pt. 4 (passim).

Since Jacob symbolizes intelligence or discernment, he is already aware of the meaning of Joseph's dream. But the fallen aspect of the human being is unaware of this science insofar as it is a fallen being; it thus must go through the process of recovery in order for it to come to know what it has always known, but which has become obscured on account of the fall from Heaven. How we know that the story's beginning implies some notion of the fall of the human being is that both discernment (Jacob) and the soul (Joseph) are conceived as two separate entities. The more coalesced they are, the more the seemingly disparate aspects of the human being are integrated. And the more integrated the human soul, the closer he is to his original nature, namely the divine image in which he was created.

Jacob tells Joseph that his vision should not be disclosed to his brothers, *lest they devise some scheme against thee* (12:5). The brothers here represent the lower aspects of the soul in general, that is, the negative tendencies within the human being—normally referred to in Sufi texts as the *nafs* or ego, which is the sum total of the negative states of the soul. By protecting the vision from his brothers, Jacob, or human discernment, reflects the awareness that one should not squander the possibility for realization (symbolized by the vision) by giving in to the lower possibilities of the self, namely the ego.

There is a clear tension between human intelligence and the ego, as seen in 12:8. Hence, the desire on the part of the brothers to be rid of Joseph so that *your father's concern might be for you. And be, thereafter, a righteous people* (12:9) can be read as the false promises that the human being qua *nafs* gives to itself that it will come under the purview of the intelligence and live a righteous life once the *nafs* reigns supreme and is fully satiated. Jacob, or the intelligence, is all too aware of the trickery of the *nafs*, and thus he is rightfully suspicious of it (12:11). The main reason Jacob gives to the brothers for not sending Joseph along with them to, as they state, *frolic and play* (12:12) is that *the wolf may eat him, while you are heedless of him* (12:13). As something that devours what stands in its path, the wolf represents the world as such, or the *dunyā*. In other words, if the soul is in a state of being *heedless* (12:13) of its true nature (symbolized by the brothers' taking charge of Joseph), this worldly life will devour it, leaving it in ruin.

We now turn to a key symbol in the Quranic account of the story of Joseph, figuring as it does three times in the story. The symbol here is of course Joseph's shirt (*qamīṣ*). As Todd Lawson notes, Joseph's shirt itself functions as a key "character," standing as "a symbol or emblem of the passage of time and narrative development and by association all narrative continuity."¹⁴ Thus, in each instance in which Joseph's shirt appears, we are encountering the *same shirt*, but in three different guises. The first time we encounter Joseph's shirt is in 12:18, where the brothers *brought forth his shirt with false blood*. The shirt here represents the soul's purity, which the soul "wears" or carries until it is torn away from it by the brothers (the *nafs*). Without its protective garment of purity, the brothers or the *nafs* throw Joseph or the human soul *in the depths of the well* (12:15), which clearly symbolizes the spiritual ailments. In the bottom of the well the soul is now in the lowest of its possible states, precisely *the lowest of the low* mentioned in 95:4. Then, with the stain of falsehood (symbolized by the blood which the

¹⁴ Lawson, "Typological Figuration and the Meaning of 'Spiritual,'" 235.

brothers—the *nafs*—placed upon the shirt in 12:18), the shirt in its sullied state is presented to the intelligence (Jacob) as normal.

With the human plunged in spiritual infirmities, the ego is victorious. Yet human intelligence will not accept the defeat of the self by the ego (12:18). The soul then rises from this lowest of all possible states and is saved by the people of the caravan, who *valued him not* (12:20). The reason they did not value Joseph (the soul) is because, in the symbolism with which we are concerned, they represent time, which has no “need” of the soul as such since time is indifferent to what takes place within it. Thus, over a period of being trapped in the well (or one’s spiritual ailments), the soul gradually awakens to its lowly state and begins to resurface, seeking to purify itself and escape the trap in which it has been placed by the ego.

Surah 12:22 speaks of Joseph as attaining *full maturity* and being granted *wisdom and knowledge* by God at that time. In 12:21 we are told that Joseph is purchased by *the man from Egypt* (12:21), who is also referred to as *the viceroy* (*‘azīz*) (12:30, 51). He is identified in Quranic exegetical literature with Potiphar in the biblical account of the story of Joseph. Potiphar clearly sees in Joseph something that others do not see, and that is why he can represent insight (*baṣīra*). In 12:22, Potiphar tells his wife, known in the Islamic tradition as Zulaykhā and commonly identified in Sufi sources with “the soul that incites to evil” (*al-nafs al-ammāra bi'l-sū*) (derived from 12:53), that she should give Joseph *honorable accommodation*. As we shall see, Zulaykhā also represents the lower self, but more specifically the passions. As is the case with Joseph’s shirt, she appears in three different guises in the story, and her lowly nature is eventually transmuted into a higher form of love shorn of sensual passion. If Potiphar symbolizes insight and Zulaykhā the passions, then his statement to her can be seen as a judgement by the soul, in its newly-realized state of maturity, that it can indeed partake in sensory pleasure, but of course within certain limits and always under the purview of knowledge and good judgement. That is to say, as the soul seeks to transmute its base qualities in order to obtain the primordial purity with which it came into the world, it can partake in sensory pleasure within good measure, and this sensory pleasure could in fact aid it on its journey back home.

Yet there is always the possibility that excessive indulgence in the passions will throw one’s focus off kilter and cause the soul to descend into deeper and darker states. This is to be kept in mind as we encounter the incident between Joseph and Zulaykhā in 12:23-25. Joseph at this stage in the story represents the soul on its journey back home, and it has already undergone a considerable amount of spiritual preparation and transformation. Yet this soul still struggles with the passions, even if they are legitimate on one level. Zulaykhā, as the excessive passionate element of the soul, thus possesses a certain kind of stronghold on the soul. In other words, a weaker soul will give in to the passions and thus cease to develop spiritually, but a soul that is stronger, one that has been given knowledge and wisdom by God on account of its spiritual maturity, will surely be better equipped to deal with the passions when confronted by them. This is why 12:24 states that Zulaykhā *indeed inclined towards him, and he would have inclined towards her had he not seen the proof of his Lord*.

Now we re-encounter that all-important “character,” namely Joseph’s shirt. At this stage in the story, Joseph’s shirt is again torn from him, but this time by Zulaykhā, or the passions (12:25-29). The struggle that ensues between Joseph and Zulaykha represents, in the first instance, the struggle of the soul to overcome the passions and to consequently strive in the truth

and transcend the false self. By the time Joseph flees from Zulaykhā, the soul has made considerable progress in overcoming the passions, despite its being pursued by them with great fervor. (Note that the shirt, here symbolizing the earlier stages of the soul's actualization of the spiritual virtues, was torn from the back [12:28], which alludes to the negative forces of the passions as they attempt to chase the soul and hold it back from making further spiritual progress.)

It should here be noted that there seems to be a sense in which Potiphar, who represents insight, is related to Jacob, or intelligence. First, insight is a lesser function of intelligence. Second, when Potiphar first sees Joseph, he refers to a possible parental relationship that may result by virtue of his taking Joseph into his household (12:21). Third, just as Jacob will later go blind and have his sight restored by virtue of Joseph's shirt (see below), so too does Potiphar go blind and have his sight restored by virtue of Joseph's shirt. This later point alludes to 12:28, where, after seeing that Joseph's shirt was torn from the back (thus clearly indicating that Zulaykha was guilty of attempting to seduce Joseph), Potiphar comes to accept Joseph's innocence. In other words, the battle of the soul with the lower passions can momentarily obscure one's spiritual insight so that matters are not seen as clearly as they were before the onslaught of the passions upon the soul (as is the case here). But when the soul breaks away from the passions—literally running away from them (12:25)—and is able to objectively observe their potential harm upon it (symbolized by the torn shirt), its insight is no longer obscured, and it can therefore again “see” clearly. This explains why, at this point, Potiphar tells Joseph to *turn away from this* (12:29).

The women of Egypt who were rumour mongering with respect to Joseph and Zulaykhā (12:30-31) also represent the soul's inner struggle with the passions, even after it has overcome the passions on one level. At 12:31 the women are clearly mesmerized by Joseph's astounding beauty, which can be understood as the soul's ultimately seeing its primordial beauty and thereby moving away from the passions and completely inward—that is, away from the world and into the sanctuary of divine remembrance and inwardness. This is why at 12:33 Joseph says that *prison*, here symbolized by the turn inward, is more beloved to him than that to which the women call him.

It can also be noted that at 12:32, unlike the first time when she was caught chasing Joseph, Zulaykhā admits her wrongdoing. But she also insists that his failure to comply with her wishes will result in his being imprisoned. Normally, this is understood to be a threat: if Joseph does not sleep with her, Zulaykhā will punish him by placing him in prison. But reading the different characters in the story as different aspects of the self, Zulaykhā first represents the passionate aspect of the human self, as we have already seen. Then, in 12:32, she represents that passionate aspect of the self now somewhat transmuted and integrated into the higher aspects of the soul such that the human self comes to recognize that if it does not give in to the lower passions, it will enter into prison, which, as we have noted, in this story represents the turn to the inward life.

In prison, Joseph encounters some prisoners and helps interpret their dreams for them (12:36-42). In other words, as the soul turns inward, into “prison,” it will naturally encounter others on the spiritual journey who require advice in their own lives and journeys. This meeting with the prison mates eventually leads Joseph to meet the king of Egypt, who releases him and

makes him viceroy of Egypt (see 12:43-50, 54-55), which was the very same function of Potiphar (see, in particular, 12:78 and 88). This “freedom” of the soul is thus a direct result of the time it has spent in spiritual retreat, thereby being called by the king or inward voice (the *hātif* in Sufi literature) to return to society in order to benefit others and to perfect the soul completely. As viceroy, the soul thus has the freedom to oversee its own spiritual affairs (see Joseph’s request to the king at 12:55), and it has the ability to act righteously and to now look back to its original, pristine state of purity.

At 12:51, the king confronts the women, and at which point Zulaykhā admits that Joseph was innocent. Although she had earlier admitted to her wrongdoing, at this stage she simply accepts her actions and does not attempt to exonerate herself or threaten or blame Joseph in any way. That is, Zulaykhā at this stage symbolizes the passions now completely transmuted into pure, detached love, fully integrated as they are into the higher aspects of the self. Now, just as Zulaykhā represents the ascending realization of the lower aspect of the soul into the higher aspect of the soul, so to do Joseph’s brothers, through their long exchange (12:59-82), come to symbolize the process of the death of the ego.

At 12:84-85 we are told that, on account of his grief over his beloved Joseph, Jacob’s *eyes had turned white*. Since it has already been established that Jacob symbolizes the intelligence, how is it that it can become blind on account of Joseph (the soul)? This is because, without the science of virtues, one’s intelligence amounts to nothing. The blindness of the intelligence can only be cured when it works together with the soul, which is to say, when knowledge and virtue, or intelligence and will, are brought into harmony with one another. The practical, lived aspect of the spiritual life here becomes a key piece to the puzzle: the soul cannot actualize its true intellectual potential unless it is perfected, at which point the clouds that cover the light of intelligence will quickly vanish away, and the light of intelligence will shine forth.

The soul that is perfectly characterized by the virtues is one in which the ego is completely slain, such that there is no personal ambition on the part of the individual, and all things are done for the sake of God. Joseph’s confronting the brothers at 12:89-92 thus symbolizes the final transmutation of the soul, whereby its lower or negative tendencies are overcome, and the other aspects of the lower self are also integrated into its higher aspects such that they partake in the natural rhythm of the life of the soul. This is best seen, for example, in the integration of the body on a positive level into the substance of the soul such that the body itself becomes sanctified and is no longer a lowly substance in and of itself. With the lower self thus conquered, the soul is able to rise to *the most beautiful stature* (95:4) in which it had originally been created.

The third and final instance in which Joseph’s shirt figures in the story occurs in 12:93 and 12:96. In 12:93, Joseph tells one of his brothers to cast his shirt upon Jacob’s face, and *he will come to see*. The shirt worn by Joseph thus represents the full embodiment of the virtues, since they become firmly rooted in the soul once it has completely passed through the barriers of time, space, and the limitations of its own lower nature. Since the entire self is now integrated into a higher order, into its primordial disposition or *fitra*, the very body of such an individual exudes a fragrance. This is why Jacob is able to detect Joseph’s scent, which is on his shirt, even before the shirt gets to him (12:94). In other words, the human being can be intellectually aware of the fruit of the spiritual life, but it needs the actual alchemical affect of the virtues to be

actualized in order for it to see. And this is what happens at 12:96, where Jacob's eyesight is returned to him once Joseph's shirt is cast over his eyes.

The victory of the soul is perfectly prefigured at the beginning of the story of Joseph, when Joseph conveys his dream to Jacob. Although already "with" the soul at the beginning of its journey, the victory of the soul as manifested in the dream is something that the soul has to actualize by going through the lived, human experience of separation from one's home and then the journey to return to that home. Thus, as we near the end of the story, at 12:100, the dream initially beheld by the soul is now something that is realized on account of the soul overcoming its lower dimensions, striving in the truth and actualizing the virtues.

The Most Beautiful of Stories

One question which remains is why the story of Joseph—itsself recounted in *the most beautiful discourse* (*aḥsan al-ḥadīth*, i.e., the Quran) (39:23)—is referred to as *the most beautiful of stories* (*aḥsan al-qaṣaṣ*) (12:3). It is precisely because this *most beautiful of stories* is the story of the perfection of man, who is created *in the most beautiful stature* (*aḥsan al-taqwīm*) (95:4). In other words, the story of man can be a beautiful story if the outcome is deliverance and the actualization of his beautiful nature. The story of Joseph is thus *the most beautiful of stories* because it is potentially your story and my story, recounting, through the symbolic dramatization of all of the stories' characters, how our souls may navigate their way about the rugged terrain of earthly life. Since the Prophet says that "God is beautiful and He loves beauty,"¹⁵ surely the most beautiful story can only be about how God's beauty is actualized by that human being who is fully realized and for whom *shall be a reward unceasing* (95:6) on account of God's love for him. And it is such a human being, having become truly beautiful and beloved to God, who emerges as the victorious hero in the most beautiful of stories, which is the story of his own life.

¹⁵ This tradition is found in the standard sources. See, for example, Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī, *al-Ṣaḥīḥ* (Cairo: Maṭba'at Muḥammad 'Alī Ṣabīḥ, 1915-1916), Īmān 41.