

# Dramatizing the Sura of Joseph: An introduction to the Islamic humanities

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**DRAMATIZING THE SURA OF JOSEPH:  
AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ISLAMIC HUMANITIES**

James W. Morris

"Surely We are recounting to you the most good-and-beautiful of tales . . ."  
(Qur'an, 12:3)

Certainly no other scholar of her generation has done more than Annemarie Schimmel to illuminate the key role of the Islamic humanities over the centuries in communicating and bringing alive for Muslims the inner meaning of the Qur'an and hadith in so many diverse languages and cultural settings. Long before a concern with "popular," oral and vernacular religious cultures (including the lives of Muslim women) had become so fashionable in religious and historical studies, Professor Schimmel's articles and books were illuminating the ongoing creative expressions and transformations of Islamic perspectives in both written and oral literatures, as well as the visual arts, in ways that have only recently begun to make their way into wider scholarly and popular understandings of the religion of Islam. And even a superficial examination of those writings will suggest how widely and profoundly the Islamic humanities, in the most diverse cultural settings, have been influenced by figures and themes drawn from the Qur'anic story of Joseph and related Islamic traditions.

However, anyone writing or teaching about the Islamic humanities, in virtually any area or cultural setting, quickly encounters a fundamental pedagogical obstacle. Put simply, the problem is that the musical, artistic, ritual, philosophic or poetic expressions of the Islamic humanities, especially from Persianate and other Indo-European cultures, are typically far more immediately accessible to contemporary Western students (of any age or scholarly discipline) than their original Islamic "sources" and inspirations in the Qur'an and hadith (and related Arabic religious sciences). At best, the available secondary and historical studies of the Islamic humanities typically tend to suggest some of the isolated symbols, images and motifs that are carried over from those religious sources, while only rarely communicating something of their more profound links with the broader, perennial spiritual, ethical, metaphysical and theological themes and concerns that are in fact central to the Qur'an and the relevant hadith literature. The first, unavoidable pedagogical challenge is therefore how to communicate to contemporary students, without any familiarity with a traditional Islamic culture, the essential inner connections between the foundational Qur'anic perspectives and their subsequent expressions in the Islamic humanities: this can only be done (just as in the direct study of those later Islamic artists, musicians and poets) by awakening the students' awareness of the immediate manifestations of those Qur'anic perspectives in all the relevant areas of their own lives and culture.

The collective dramatization of key episodes from the Qur'anic story of Joseph, along with intensive discussion of what students come to learn from that dramatization, is one effective pedagogical tool for awakening that indispensable personal realization of the perennial manifestations of key Qur'anic themes and concepts. For the Sura of Joseph, while relatively short, illustrates virtually all the fundamental features of the Qur'anic discourse and outlook which have remained central throughout centuries of later elaboration in the Islamic humanities. Here we can only mention a few of the most important of those points:

1. Dramatizing this Sura, with its focus on the interplay between the spiritual life and its outer ethical and political occasions and manifestations, beautifully illustrates the repeated fundamental Qur'anic assertions about the divine "Book" and the archetypal, constantly repeated nature and spiritual purpose of the "tests" and "likenesses" and "stories" mirroring and constituting our human existence – claims that are reasserted, in the strongest possible terms, in the opening and closing frame-verses of this chapter of the Qur'an.
2. The structure of discourse in this Sura clearly and repeatedly brings out the defining features of Qur'anic discourse – and its corresponding metaphysical claims or assumptions – as dramatically typified by the constantly fluid, often indeterminate shifts in perspective (alike of time, tense, "identity" and relationship), both "within" the overarching divine Voices and "between" those mysterious Speaker(s) and the more visible actors in the recurring human drama. Students attempting to act out that drama quickly come to see how, in terms of today's humanities, perhaps only "cinematic" (or possibly musical) means would be adequate to convey this constant simultaneity – and resulting ambiguity – of the different levels of divine and human perspective which is such a central feature of Qur'anic discourse and its claims about the nature of being.<sup>1</sup> Above all, anyone attempting to act out this story is obliged to engage the primordial

<sup>1</sup>Of course, in the classical Islamic humanities themselves, there are also any number of remarkable artistic illustrations of this typically Qur'anic perspective to be found among the surviving examples of

mystery of the identity and reality of the intimate, singular "you" throughout the Sura – i.e., the ultimate "addressee" of this divine Speech – at a level which immediately goes beyond the safe distance of a purely conceptual or analytical inquiry. That engagement, in turn, leads to the sort of ongoing reflection on the interplay between the divine "Names" (or rather, their underlying Realities) and their manifestations in the world and our experience – i.e., the Qur'anic "Signs" of God – which is indispensable for beginning any serious approach to the Qur'an and its subsequent re-creations in the Islamic humanities.

3. Most importantly, the Sura of Joseph not only introduces virtually all of the spiritual virtues mentioned in the Qur'an (at first as rather unfamiliar Arabic concepts or symbols), but it actually illustrates the inevitably personal and dramatic process of individual discovery, of "initiation" and spiritual pedagogy, through which each human being gradually discovers the reality and existence of those virtues (or one's intimate relationship to the Divine) through their contrast with the received structure of humanly conventional (social, ethical and political) "virtues" that each of us ordinarily – or at least initially – takes to be most real. As with any play, the demands of dramatization<sup>2</sup> oblige each participant to (a) rediscover for each character the corresponding situations, motives and inspirations (or sometimes the lack thereof) within his own world and experience; and (b) recognize clearly and reflect upon the decisive unexplained "leaps" within the Qur'anic narrative, those moments which almost always presuppose a critical spiritual transformation or "intervention" of divine Grace (e.g., in order to bring about true Forgiveness, the actual realization of the all-encompassing creative divine Love, *rahma*).

At the very least, then, acting out key sections of the Sura will almost inevitably bring to light, for any serious participant, the decisive, troubling contrast (at key moments in our own lives, or in more public events) between our outwardly inexplicable knowledge of proper conduct and the visible demands of socially and culturally supported norms and expectations; the actual dependence of those memorable moments of ethical (or spiritual, artistic, etc.) realization on some "external" Grace or illuminating power; and the strange "untranslatability" of the inner reality of those situations into everyday language and categories of explanation. At best, further reflection on those experiences triggered by the process of dramatization, and an expanding consciousness of the inner "hypocrisy" (to use the Qur'anic expression) underlying so much of each person's conduct in the world, may lead more reflective students toward a deeper awareness of the links between such inner states and the more visible manifestations of human evil and self-destructiveness in the world. The same process of reflection, if it is sustained long enough, will eventually lead to a growing appreciation of the inner unity of the spiritual virtues (as different manifestations of the divine Presence in what we perceive as outwardly different situations), and ultimately toward a heightened awareness of the wider metaphysical, eschatological and soteriological perspectives within which the Qur'an itself presents these recurrent human dilemmas.

For initial study purposes, students may find helpful the outline provided in the Appendix (immediately following the translation) of the main "spiritual categories" or key Qur'anic virtues (and their contraries) illustrated in the course of this drama – keeping in mind that the most illuminating episodes are usually those ironic ones revealing the radical contrast between the actual reality of those spiritual virtues and the unconsciously "hypocritical" versions assumed by the unenlightened actors. The most important of those spiritual virtues, as well as many of the other key themes in the Sura, are at least briefly explained and introduced in a footnote to the verse where they first arise.

#### THE TRANSLATION

The distinctive features of any version of the Qur'an (surely a more accurate term than "translation," given the challenges involved) are necessarily dictated by the audience(s) and pedagogical purposes involved. The one offered here is necessarily a compromise between the two conflicting demands of a minimal degree of English readability required by students (and sometimes teachers) without any acquaintance with the Arabic text and related Islamic background, and the ideal of a kind of "literalness" that would actually begin to convey something of the full strangeness and incomparability of the form, structure and contents of the

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miniature painting from the later Eastern Islamic world, while the masterpieces of classical "mystical" poetry, in whatever Islamic language, provide the perfect exemplification of this fundamental feature of Qur'anic discourse.

<sup>2</sup>Requirements which are of course no different from that active and engaged reading of Scripture that eventually gave rise to the different expressions of the Islamic humanities. However, such fully "participatory" reading is not only an increasingly rare skill among contemporary students, but would of course be an enormous challenge (given present translations of the Qur'an) for even the most committed and diligent student working solely in English, without a profound knowledge of Arabic and related Islamic tradition.

original. Without attempting to explain or justify each choice, a few basic points – especially features that are not found in most published versions of the Qur'an – should be kept in mind in reading or acting out this chapter.

First, the strange *mise-en-page* necessary to convey something of the constant shifts in ambiguities of perspective and identity throughout this drama is by no means limited to this Sura: in fact it constitutes the most fundamental and inimitable feature of Qur'anic discourse, and one that has continued to inspire many of the most memorable creations of the Islamic humanities, in music and the visual arts as well as through the written and spoken word.

Secondly, the footnotes are limited to information that will help provide first-time readers with some sense of the internal Qur'anic context and of the essential inner "connections" with more general Qur'anic themes and concepts or symbols that would usually be obvious to later Muslim readers – i.e., the creators of the Islamic humanities – reading this Sura from the vantage point of a thorough acquaintance with the entire Qur'an.<sup>3</sup> To keep such notes to a minimum, those key themes and concepts have usually been discussed only at their first appearance, while the most important or untranslatable ones have been presented in small capitals throughout the translation, to remind readers of their "technical" nature and of the more adequate explanation of the underlying Arabic at the initial note. In general, the translation has been kept as "literal" and non-explanatory as possible, although that often sounds clumsy or unnatural in English, since so much of the essential indeterminacy<sup>4</sup> and multivalent meaning of the text – features which have inspired so many different and creative interpretations by later Muslim authors – are necessarily lost in a more "explanatory" translation. This is especially important for bringing out the avowedly central symbolic and archetypal eschatological and metaphysical dimensions of the discussion, which are inevitably diminished if the Sura is viewed simply as another retelling of a supposedly more familiar Biblical narrative.<sup>5</sup>

#### DRAMATIC STRUCTURE

The concluding verse of the Sura stresses that the underlying lesson of this chapter, for the truly qualified and attentive readers or listeners, is to be found in "their stories" – that is to say, in the actions, motives and transformations of all of the characters. And later creators of the classical Islamic humanities often found their inspiration through focusing in on the spiritual meaning and perception of those same stories from the perspective of characters (especially Jacob and "Zulaykha") who are not likely to be at the forefront of interest for those discovering this text for the first time. (On the other hand, the dramatization of this story is likely to bring out the greater familiarity and immediacy of certain actors, like Joseph's brothers or Zulaykha's 'friends,' whose roles were obvious to the traditional commentators.)

However, the Sura as a whole, viewed from the externally central standpoint of the story of Joseph (and his family), has a remarkably classical, almost mathematical harmony and symmetry, as indicated in the following summary outline. Apart from the framing verses outlining the universal significance of the "story" and its ongoing recurrence in the world, the first half recounts Joseph's own trials and ascension, using the wider eschatological and metaphysical symbolism and perspectives of the Qur'an, as an archetypal "likeness" for the process of the gradual spiritual perfection and realization of the prophets and saints (and at least potentially, of each human soul). The second half then portrays the soteriological role and far-reaching activities and perspectives of the prophets and saints (and of divine Providence more generally) as they "return" to share their transformed realization of the nature of things with the rest of humanity, according to the very different aptitudes and situation of each soul. In both parts, of course, the intermittent chorus of divine Voices (the mysterious "We" and other narrators) and the usually silent presence of Jacob provide constant spoken and silent "commentaries" on the inner meaning and personal relevance of this divine Comedy from even broader perspectives.

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<sup>3</sup>This means that for the particular purposes of this study, it is possible to leave out a wide range of obvious historical and philological questions that would naturally interest those studying this chapter from other perspectives.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., the lack of identification (or the highly symbolic names) of so many of the speakers, the uncertainty about the time or "location" of key events, and the sudden, unexplained shifts in subject, location, and narrative perspective (or divine "commentary").

<sup>5</sup>Any dramatization or discussion of this Sura (focused on its meaning within Islamic culture) must surely begin with the remarkably wide-ranging claims of its importance and ramifications in the opening and closing verses.

## Structure of the Drama

PROLOGUE: verses 1-3

PART I: Joseph's Tests (verses 4-57)

- 4-6: Beginning: Joseph's Vision and Jacob's response.  
 7-18: Joseph and his brothers' "scheming"; Jacob's reaction.  
 19-34: Joseph in Potiphar's house (Zulaykha and the scheming women; Joseph's first test).  
 35-49: Joseph in Prison and his "Two Companions" (Joseph's final test: the transcendence of duality through the realization of divine Unicity).

CLIMAX (50-57): The eschatological perspective realized: reversal of fortunes, revelation of hidden sins and scheming, ultimate reward and eschatological balance; Joseph as true Viceroy (*khalifa*) of "the King."

PART II: The Brothers' Tests and the Passion of Jacob (verses 58-101)

- 58-69: First test/round-trip and revelation to Benjamin.  
 70-92: Second test/round-trip and forgiveness of brothers.  
 93-101: Final journey and reconciliation: the truth of Joseph's vision, and Jacob's Insight restored.

Concluding Divine Commentary (verses 102-111)

#### THE "ACTORS"

As we have already noted, the most fundamental ambiguity in regard to this Sura (and much of the rest of the Qur'an as well) has to do not with the actors, but the intended "audience": who is the "you" (in the singular) that is the primary object of the eternal (or extra-temporal) divine Address? At times, of course, that figure seems to be Joseph himself, or sometimes Muhammad, but the Sura (and the Qur'an) loses much of its dramatic power if its reader (or listener) refuses to acknowledge that often some part or dimension of each of us is being addressed – a dimension which, as other passages of the Qur'an more strongly and openly suggest, may somehow connect us with each of the prophets, and beyond them, with those mysterious and recurrent divine "Names" which for later Muslim interpreters became the keys to their many interpretations of this sacred "Recitation."

A second fundamental point to keep in mind is the frequent ambiguity (or deeper meaning) of each of the identifications of the characters in this story – both essential features that powerfully highlight the archetypal, recurrent nature of the drama recounted here. In the list of actors below we have sometimes added (in parentheses) the traditional names or identifications of certain actors, but the special significance of certain names actually used in the Qur'anic account (especially of the two Rulers who precede and elevate Joseph) is explained in the footnotes where those titles first appear. Finally, serious students of this text should always keep in mind the silent, unspeaking witnesses and actors – and not only such central silent presences as Satan (*Shaytân*) and Jacob. As in the history around us (and even more obviously in sacred history), the measure of the spiritual significance and experience of each character may have little enough to do with their spoken words or the public visibility of their role. Here, for example, Joseph's mother only appears silently at the very end (verse 100) – but elevated, together with Jacob, to the vice-regal Throne.

#### The Characters

First NARRATOR	his WIFE (Zulaykha)
divine "WE"	WITNESS from their household
INTERNAL Narrator <sup>6</sup>	WOMEN of the city
JOSEPH	TWO FELLOW-PRISONERS
"HIS BROTHER" (Benjamin)	THE KING
"HIS FATHER" (Jacob)	DIGNITARIES of the royal court
the SHAYTÂN	royal MESSENGER
his (other) BROTHERS	Joseph's MANSERVANTS
WATER-BEARER (and the caravan)	a HERALD
the DEAR/MIGHTY-ONE (al-'Aziz: later Joseph's own title; Potiphar)	a bearer of GOOD NEWS
	his MOTHER (silently)

<sup>6</sup>Who may of course be identical with the divine "We" (or some part of that Voice), or with the first Narrator.

## Dramatizing the Sura of Joseph

### THE SURA OF JOSEPH

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Frame NARRATOR	Divine "WE"	ACTORS	INNER "ASIDES"
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In the name of God, THE ALL-LOVING,<sup>7</sup> THE ALL-COMPASSIONATE

[1] Alif Lām Rā:<sup>8</sup> Those are the SIGNS of the BOOK<sup>9</sup>  
making-clear.

Indeed We have sent It down, as a RECITATION<sup>10</sup>  
(Qur'ân) in Arabic, so that you-all might  
understand.

We, We are recounting to you the most good-  
and-beautiful of tales through what We  
have inspired to you, this Recitation – even  
though before It you were among the  
heedless-ones.

When Joseph said to his father:

"O my dear-father, <sup>11</sup> I indeed, I have seen  
eleven planets and the sun and the moon: I saw  
them bowing down to me!"

[5] He said:

"O my dear-son, do not recount your vision to  
your brothers, for they are devising a scheme against

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<sup>7</sup>al-Rahmân: This divine Name, which appears together with its related intensive form al-Rahîm at the beginning of all but one of the chapters of the Qur'an, is distinguished both by its frequency and by its special closeness to the all-encompassing divine Name "God" (Allâh) (e.g., 17:110). While its Arabic root includes derived meanings of "mercy" and "compassion," its much wider meaning in the Qur'anic context – where, evoking its original etymological reference to the womb, it conveys the all-encompassing "Maternal" creativity and caring of the Creator for all creatures – can only be approximated in English by the closely related religious dimensions of divine "Love." How that Love can in fact be the most profound and essential divine Attribute, despite the recurrent human experiences apparently suggesting otherwise, is precisely the central theme and argument of this Sura.

<sup>8</sup>The numerical equivalents of these three separate Arabic letters – which were also used as numbers and have often been seen as keys to the meanings of the similar mysterious figures at the beginning of many Suras – are 1, 30 and 200.

<sup>9</sup>The Qur'anic contexts of this recurrent expression (appearing some 230 times) make it clear that the reference here is to the divine "archetype" or eternal Reality expressed in all of Creation as well as in all the prophetic "revelations" – which in the Qur'an clearly include the spiritual Realities or "persons" of all the prophets, as well as the particular oral or written messages some of them have set forth.

The central Qur'anic expression âya (occurring almost 400 times, and often translated in other contexts as "miracle" or even "verse" of the Qur'an itself) refers – as at verse 105 below – to the inner reality of all phenomena and experience (see 41:53) as "signs" or symbols pointing human beings toward an awareness of their divine Ground and Source (and toward the specific divine "Names" manifested in each of those particular Signs). Again the drama of this Sura turns almost entirely on the contrasting states of the actors' relative awareness or unconsciousness of the constant presence and meaning of those divine signs.

<sup>10</sup>Qur'an (usually associated with an Arabic root referring to "recitation" or "reading") is only one of a considerable number of different terms used in the Qur'an itself to refer to various aspects of the revelation to Muhammad. As throughout the Qur'an, the Voice of the mysterious divine "We" that enters the Sura here stands outside or beyond the passage of earthly time in such a way that it is often difficult or even impossible to be sure just who the "you" being addressed actually is.

<sup>11</sup>Here, as throughout the Sura, the special relations between Joseph and Jacob are marked by the distinctive use of an intimate, familiar form of address that stands in marked contrast to the formal language used by the other brothers – and which also gradually turns out to mirror the personal relationship of each of those characters with that particular aspect of God referred to as their own "RABB" (see n. 14 below).

you. The Shaytân is indeed for INSAN<sup>12</sup> an enemy making-clear!"

[Jacob to Joseph? – or "We"/Narrator<sup>13</sup> (to whom)?]

And that is how your RABB<sup>14</sup> picks you out, and causes you to KNOW<sup>15</sup> through FINDING-THE-INNER-MEANING of what-comes-to be,<sup>16</sup> and fulfills His blessing upon you and upon the people of Jacob, as He fulfilled His blessing upon your two fathers before, Abraham and Isaac. Indeed your RABB is ALL-KNOWING ALL-WISE!

[Narrator?/"We"?]: So in Joseph and his brothers there was surely a SIGN for those who-question-and-inquire.

When they said:

"Now Joseph and his brother are more dearly beloved by our father than us, though we are a tightknit bunch: Certainly our father is clearly gone astray!"

[Who? The Shaytân? One of the brothers?]:

"Kill Joseph! Or toss him out on some earth, (so that) your father's regard may be

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<sup>12</sup>Throughout the Qur'an this key term refers to the "theomorphic," spiritual reality of every human being – "pre-existing" (in the Qur'anic account) the created, part-animal mortal form of "clay" referred to as bashar (n. 30 below) – or that manifestation of the uncreated divine "Spirit of God" (rûh Allâh, at verse 87 below) whose mysterious inner relationship with God is precisely what this Sura is intended to illuminate.

The contrast between divine and "Satanic" (or ordinary human) "scheming" and "contriving" (kayd, makar) is of course a central theme throughout this chapter, which gradually reveals how the convoluted workings of Iblis/Satan themselves eventually turn out to be an "illuminating," an essential part of the much larger divine "scheming" to bring about the spiritual education and maturity of human beings.

<sup>13</sup>As often in this Sura (and throughout the Qur'an) this verse seemingly begins with Jacob addressing Joseph, but by the end (and certainly by the following verse) it is not at all clear which Voice is speaking – and above all, who is being addressed.

<sup>14</sup>This key term is used more than a thousand times in the Qur'an – usually as an emotionally charged form of address or reference evoking our "personal," most powerfully real and intimate existential relationship to some aspect of the divine (and far less commonly our relation to an earthly "master"). The Arabic root is powerfully associated – especially in this religious context – with the meaning of a parent lovingly and devotedly "raising" or "taking care of" and educating a dependent child. As with much of the Qur'anic vocabulary drawn from contexts of responsibility and hierarchical relationship, it is devoid of the strong and predominantly negative (or else vaguely Christological) associations of any of the usual English equivalents such as "Lord." One of the central themes of this Sura is the dramatic, often highly ironic ways the actors gradually discover the actual intimate reality of their own RABB.

<sup>15</sup>"KNOWING" in this special sense of divinely inspired spiritual awareness ("Ilm) is one of the central spiritual virtues in the Qur'an (appearing almost 900 times), and also provides a clear illustration of the "pedagogical" relationship between the divine "Names" and their human manifestations. As illustrated throughout this Sura, the term typically refers to direct (non-conceptual) human awareness of God and the spiritual world, of the inner nature of things and the ultimate realities underlying the phenomenal and historical world. As mentioned repeated in this Sura (especially by Jacob), this rare knowing is given by God, and its human locus is the Heart (qalb, lubb, etc.). The Qur'anic term is also intimately connected with the central symbolic families, especially prominent in this Sura, of images of Sight and Light. Its key contraries, ironically illustrated throughout this drama, include "ignorance" or "foolishness" (jahl), "heedlessness" (ghafla), and ungratefully "rejecting" or "covering up" God's SIGNS (kufr), etc.

<sup>16</sup>Ta'wil al-ahâdîth: The first term of this key phrase refers to "taking (things) back to the First," to their ultimate Source, while the second refers to whatever "comes to be" – certainly not particularly to "dreams" (cf. same terms at verses 21, 44-45, and 100-101). This recurrent contrast (cf. verses 2, 45, and 100-101) between true spiritual "vision" or insight and the "dreamlike" illusion of what most people ordinarily take to be most "real" is perhaps the most obvious unifying theme and lesson of the entire Sura.

left for you-all alone. And after that you-all can be a group DOING-WHAT-IS-RIGHT!"<sup>17</sup>

[10] One of them, speaking, said:  
"Don't kill Joseph, but throw him in the hidden-depth of the well, (so that) some caravan may pick him up, if you-all are indeed doing (what you propose)."

They said:  
"O our father, why do you not have FAITH<sup>18</sup> in us regarding Joseph, though surely we are sincerely meaning him well!? Send him with us tomorrow, (so that) he may run around and play. Certainly we are protecting him!"

[15] Then when they took him with them and agreed together that they would put him in the hidden-depth of the well, We inspired in him:  
"Surely you will inform them of this affair of theirs, while they are (still) unaware!"

Verses 13-14  
(see errata sheet attached)

And they came to their father in the night (or: 'night-blind,' 'dim-sighted'), crying.

They said:  
"O our father, we, we went off trying to get ahead of one another, and we left Joseph back with our possessions. So the wolf ate him up!"

"But you don't have FAITH in us, even if we were S. MAKING-TRUTHFULLY!"<sup>19</sup>

And they came with lying blood upon his shirt. He said:

"No, on the contrary: your souls<sup>20</sup> (your "NAFS") have seduced you into some affair!"

<sup>17</sup>Whether the speaker here is meant to be "Satan" directly, or one of the brothers speaking for him, this passage powerfully introduces the Sura's fundamental and constantly ironic contrast between conventionally and socially sanctioned "virtues" and the infinitely rarer spiritual virtues exemplified by Jacob and (eventually) Joseph. The key Arabic root s-l-h ordinarily refers to whatever is "right" in the sense of "fitting" or "appropriate" or "healthy" in a given situation, but the Qur'anic usage consistently joins and precedes references to the "right things" (al-sâlihât) with the essential pre-condition of "having FAITH" (îmân: see following note). The difficulty and rarity of that precondition is amply illustrated in the rest of this chapter.

<sup>18</sup>This Sura is full of ironic plays on a single Arabic root (ʔ-m-n) that refers to the experience of trust, confidence, safety and assurance, and which always evokes in this Qur'anic context the key spiritual virtue of îmân (occurring almost 900 times in the Qur'an). Îmân is the condition of faith, inner peace and absolute assurance, implicit confidence and total trust, granted by God (and intimately connected with the Qur'anic symbolism of Light and Knowledge). Its most frequently mentioned "contents" or perceptions include the reality and presence of God, the angels, and all the divine "Books" and Messengers. The term and its root are completely unrelated to any conceptual notion of "belief" (as it is often fatally mistranslated in English), and its nearest Qur'anic equivalents are rather absolute certainty (yaqîn) of the Truth or divinely inspired "KNOWING" ('ilm: n. 15 above).

<sup>19</sup>Sidq (and related epithets such as al-Sâdiqûn, or al-Siddiq later applied to Joseph, together appearing more than 150 times in the Qur'an) is one of the most untranslatable of the spiritual virtues mentioned there: it means recognizing and acknowledging the truth of what is actually True or Real – and ultimately therefore discerning the divine Presence and intentions behind the superficial appearance of things. That realization is made possible by the rare state of inner sincerity, purity, total confidence and trust (in God), and one very outward expression of that spiritual state is the more mundane sense of "sincere truth-telling" that is assumed by the brothers (and our usual translation of that root) here.

<sup>20</sup>Much like the English expression "the self," the Arabic term nafs has a wide range of possible meanings in the Qur'an, from a simple reflexive pronoun ("oneself") to much deeper psychological and even metaphysical or theological dimensions (especially as "soul," connected with its Arabic root reference to

Errata: *Verses 13 and 14* (see below) were inadvertently left out of the published translation:

[10] One of them, speaking, said:

"Don't kill Joseph, but throw him in the hidden-depth of the well, (so that) some caravan may pick him up, if you-all are indeed doing (what you propose)."

They said:

"O our father, why do you not have faith in us regarding Joseph, though surely we are sincerely meaning him well!? Send him with us tomorrow, (so that) he may run around and play. Certainly we are protecting him!"

[13] He said:

"As for me, it does make me sad for you-all to take him with you. And I am afraid that the wolf may eat him up while you-all are heedless in regard to him!"

[14] They said:

"If the wolf were to eat him up, while we're such a tightknit-bunch, then we would be the ones suffering loss!"

"So SABR<sup>21</sup> is beautiful. And it is God (alone)  
Whose Help must be sought against what  
you-all describe!"

And a caravan came along. So they sent their water-  
man, and he let down his vessel. He said:

"O what GOOD NEWS! This is a young man!"<sup>22</sup>

And they kept him hidden, as trading-goods,

But God is ALL-KNOWING of what they are doing.

[20] And they sold him for a cheap price, a number of  
dirhams – for they were among those considering  
him of little value.

And the one from Egypt who bought him said to his  
wife:

"Honor his dwellingplace. Perhaps he may  
be useful to us and we may adopt him as a son."

And that is how We established a place for  
Joseph upon the earth, and so that We  
might cause him to KNOW through FINDING-  
THE-INNER-MEANING of what-comes-to-be.

[Frame Narrator/or still "We"?)

And God is prevailing in his affair – but most of the  
people do not know!

And then when he reached his mature-strength  
We brought him WISE-JUDGMENT<sup>23</sup> and  
(divine) KNOWING: That is how We reward  
the MUHSINUN.<sup>24</sup>

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"breath" or "spirit"). In this translation we have noted some of the more problematic occurrences, where the meaning could be understood in rather different ways: this passage and verse 53 below became the locus classicus for later Islamic references to the psycho-spiritual aspect of the nafs as the "carnal soul" manifesting the reprehensible qualities of the human-animal (*bashar*, rather than *insân*).

<sup>21</sup>Sabr, which is exemplified in the Qur'an (and thus in Islamic culture) at least as much by the figure of Jacob as by Job, refers here to the inner spiritual state of someone who faithfully perseveres in allegiance and devotion to the divine Truth because they are aware of the real nature and ultimate aim or true context of their present difficult circumstances. The degree to which the Sura of Joseph is at least equally a drama about Jacob – as emphasized in many later versions of this tale in the Islamic humanities – only becomes clear after repeated reading and meditation, as the full reality and implications of Jacob's SABR becomes apparent. Such reflection will also highlight the distance between this remarkably all-encompassing spiritual (or prophetic) virtue and what is typically suggested by such English equivalents as "patience."

<sup>22</sup>The term *ghulam* would ordinarily refer simply to a "boy" or "young man" (as the water-drawer clearly understands it here). In the Qur'an, however, it almost always refers (9 of 11 times) to the very special spiritual state of a young future prophet, visible only to those family members, like Jacob here, who are specially inspired by God (Abraham, Mary, Zachariah). The near-synonym *fatâ* is used much more frequently here to refer to a young male servant or slave.

<sup>23</sup>Divinely inspired "Wisdom" (HIKMA) or the inspired Right-Judgement and spiritual Authority (Hukm) concerning particular circumstances that flows from such inspired Knowing are mentioned as human spiritual virtues almost a hundred times in the Qur'an (along with almost a hundred references to God as the ultimate Hakîm). The same Arabic root (h-k-m) also often refers to a number of related notions concerning power, mastery, firmness, and authority or rulership which ordinarily belong to rather different semantic fields in English. We have therefore tried to signal each appearance of this particularly untranslatable root in the course of the translation.

<sup>24</sup>*Ihsân*, perhaps the most untranslatable of all the spiritual virtues mentioned in the Qur'an, appears almost 200 times, and clearly refer to one of the highest spiritual states, typifying the greatest prophets. Literally "doing/making-what-is-good-and-beautiful," its Qur'anic usage stresses the even deeper inspired awareness necessary to know what is truly good-and-beautiful in any particular situation. In a very famous canonical hadith, in which it appears as the summa of the spiritual virtues comprising True Religion (*al-Dîn*), the Prophet defines *ihsân* for the angel Gabriel as "worshipping/serving God as though you see Him;

## Dramatizing the Sura of Joseph

And the (woman) in whose house he was tried to entice him away from himself. She locked the doors and said:

"Come here!"

He said:

"May God protect (me)! He is my RABB, who has made good-and-beautiful my dwellingplace. He does not cause the wrongdoer to truly-flourish!"

Now she was longing for him, and he was longing for her, were it not that he saw the Proof of his RABB.

That is how (it was), so that We might keep away from him evil and indecency. He is indeed among OUR WHOLLY-DEVOTED SERVANTS.<sup>25</sup>

[25] So they each tried to reach the door first and she ripped his shirt in back, and at the door they met her master. She said:

"What is the recompense for someone who intended evil for your family, if not that he be imprisoned or (receive) painful torment!?"<sup>26</sup>

He (Joseph) said:

"She tried to entice me away from myself!"

And a witness from her people testified:

"If his shirt is ripped in front, then she spoke truthfully and he is among the liars, but if his shirt is ripped in back, then she has lied and he is among THOSE SPEAKING-TRUTHFULLY."

So when he [her husband] saw his shirt was ripped in back, he said:

"This is from your (fem. plural) scheming, for your scheming is indeed tremendous!"

"O Joseph, turn away from this!"

[to his wife:] "And you, seek forgiveness for your offense: surely you were among the erring ones!"<sup>27</sup>

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and even if you didn't see Him, He sees you" – or, in an equally possible translation: ". . . and if you are not, then you do see Him."

<sup>25</sup>The virtue of *ikhlaṣ* refers to absolute inner purity of intention, doing whatever one does entirely for God's sake, in a state of pure inner "surrender" (*islām/taslīm*) and complete satisfaction (*riḍā*) with the divine Will. In the Qur'an it is often connected specifically with the spiritual state of the prophets and saints, while the phrase "(God's/Our) wholly-devoted servants" is specifically applied to those specially privileged souls whose unique inner purity saves them from suffering the (divinely authorized) tests and delusions of Iblis/Satan (15:40 and 38:83).

<sup>26</sup>The concluding Arabic phrase here ("*adhāb alīm*") is used some seventy times in the Qur'an to refer to the sufferings or punishments of Gehenna and the "Fire"; the particular Arabic root referring to "prison" here (*s-j-n*) is also used to refer to a fearful level of Gehenna in several key eschatological passages. Thus Zulaykha's "threat" here has direct and powerful eschatological resonances that openly set the stage for a more symbolic, metaphysical "reading" of this drama and Joseph's predicament already at this early stage of his story.

<sup>27</sup>The husband here uses one of the milder terms for "sin" or transgression in the Qur'an; the root *kh-t-* refers primarily to an (unintentional or one-time) "mistake" or "error," not to more deeply rooted and perversely evil acts of will. The husband's remarkably calm (and dramatically somewhat incongruous) emphasis on forgiveness here underlines both the truly divine nature and source of that virtue and the ways in which each of the "ruling" figures in the Sura – Jacob, the husband here, the King, and finally Joseph –

[30] And some women in the city said:

"The wife of the DEAR/MIGHTY-ONE<sup>28</sup> is trying to entice her young servant away from himself. He's made her fall madly in love. Indeed we see she's clearly gone astray!"

So when she heard about those women's sly-devising<sup>29</sup> she sent to them and prepared for them a cushion, and she brought a knife to every one of them and said (to Joseph):

"Come out before them!"

And when the women saw him they glorified him and they all cut their hands (in astonishment), and they said:

"God preserve (us)! This is no ordinary-mortal<sup>30</sup> – this can only be a majestic angel!"

She said:

"So there for you-all is the one because of whom you were reproaching me! I did try to entice him away from himself, only he resisted."

[to herself?] "But if he doesn't do what I order him to, he will most certainly be imprisoned, and then he will surely be among the lowly ones!"

So his RABB did respond to him and turned their scheming away from him. Surely He is the ALWAYS-LISTENING, the ALL-KNOWING.

[35] Next,<sup>31</sup> it appeared (right) to them (masc. pl.), after they had seen the SIGNS, to imprison him until a certain time.

And two young servants entered the prison with him. One of the two said:

"I am seeing myself squeezing out wine."

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appears above all as a more or less open and expressly "super-human" embodiment of that particularly divine Attribute (see n. 7 above on rahma).

<sup>28</sup>al-'Aziz: this is one of the more common of the divine Names in the Qur'an, appearing more than a hundred times, so that no reader/listener familiar with the Qur'an could possibly miss the metaphysical resonances of that title here. (Note the very similar case of al-Malik, "The King," below.) Even more pointedly, Joseph turns out to have this same semi-regal title when he is later addressed by his brothers.

<sup>29</sup>The Qur'an has some thirty striking references to the contrast between the "scheming" (makar: cf. the related concept of kayd at n. 12 above) characteristic of so much human (and Satanic) activity and the paradoxically providential spiritual results of that deluded activity from the wider divine perspective of the "Best of Schemers" (khayr al-mâkirîn, at 3:54 and 8:30) – a contrast that is of course one of the central dramatic themes of this particular Sura.

<sup>30</sup>Bashar (in the standard Qur'anic contrast with insân explained in n. 12 above): as so often in this Sura, the actors here ironically speak the truth for totally wrong reasons, without being aware of those divine or prophetic qualities (beyond his incomparable physical beauty) which make Joseph's being truly "angelic."

It must be stressed that all the actors in this Sura (i.e., Egyptians and Jacob's family alike) are portrayed as sharing the same religious vocabulary, differing only in their relative awareness of the realities to which those familiar words actually refer.

<sup>31</sup>Thumma: a distinctive conjunction clearly marking a substantial break in the story. The Qur'anic account itself offers no explanation here of these "Signs" or of this mysterious (masculine) "they" and the actual motives for Joseph's imprisonment, beyond the subsequent revelation (at verse 52) of the apparent role of Zulaykha and her friends in it. The vagueness of this situation and the description here only heighten and accentuate the impression of apparently arbitrary or unjust and undeserved suffering that is clearly intended to evoke analogous experiences and impressions within each reader's/listener's own life.

[30] And some women in the city said:

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And the other one said:

"I am seeing myself carrying above my head a loaf of bread from which the birds are eating."

[Both of them:]

"Inform us both about the INNER-MEANING (ta'wīl) of it. For we see you among the MUHSINUN."

He said:

"There does not come to you two any nourishment that is bestowed as your SUSTENANCE,<sup>32</sup> but that I have already told both of you the INNER-MEANING of it, before it comes to you both. That, for you both, is among what my RABB has caused me to KNOW. I have indeed forsaken the MILLA<sup>33</sup> of a group who do not have FAITH in God and who reject<sup>34</sup> THE-OTHER-WORLD!"

"And I have followed the MILLA of my fathers, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob: it was not for us to associate any thing with God. That was through God's favor for us and for (all) the people – and yet most of the people are not giving-thanks!"

"O two companions [or 'masters'] of the Prison.<sup>35</sup> Are disparate-separate lords [pl. of RABB] better – or God THE-ONE, THE-OVERPOWERING?!"

<sup>32</sup>"Sustenance" here can only suggest a few dimensions of the recurrent Qur'anic term *rizq* (and related forms), which almost always refers to the universal divine activities of creating and bestowing all the forms of God's "Grace" and "Bounty," including much more than food and extending ultimately to the very existence of all creatures and forms of manifestation. The unusually complicated Arabic syntax throughout this entire episode with the "two prisoners" strongly emphasizes the metaphysical and theological dimensions of this situation – almost to the point of an explicit allegory for the "dualism" and inherently prison-like suffering inseparable from all human existence so long as our perceptions of being are limited to "this world" (*dunyā*) of matter, space and time, without any deep awareness of the "other," spiritual world (*al-ākhirā*). This likely reading of the passage is even more strongly emphasized by the otherwise virtually inexplicable "switch" to the theological arguments at the end of this verse and throughout the following verses, which would otherwise have little obvious connection either to the two prisoners' visions or to their respective fates.

<sup>33</sup>This mysterious Qur'anic expression – which later became perhaps the most common Islamic expression for different "religions" in the exoteric sociological and historical sense – is usually used in the Qur'an specifically in connection with the particular monotheistic religious "way" or path of Abraham (or his descendants), sometimes, as here, in contrast with opposing religious perspectives or ways of life.

<sup>34</sup>Or "cover over" or "are ungrateful for": the key Qur'anic root *k-f-r* appears very frequently as the active contrary both of the central spiritual virtues of faith and mindfulness and of gratitude or thankfulness to God, spiritual states which – as this verse and the entire passage strongly emphasize – are sincerely inconceivable from the limited standpoint of the "prison" of "this world" (*al-dunyā*), without the inner awareness of its Source and continuation in the "other world" (*al-ākhirā*) that Joseph gradually discovers through his imprisonment.

<sup>35</sup>Given the constant stress on duality (and contrasting insistence on divine Unity) throughout Joseph's strange speech here, the metaphysical and eschatological dimensions of this passage are further heightened by the fact that the particular Arabic term for "prison" used here (*al-sijn*, one of several possible Arabic expressions) strongly evokes "The Prison" (*al-Sijjīn*) described elsewhere in the Qur'an as one of the lowest "levels" of Gehenna.

Those considerations suggest that a literal translation of Joseph's strange epithet for his companions – i.e., as the "two masters" of the prison, those who "control" or possess it; or as its "two owners" and rightful inhabitants – may more adequately describe the state of all those who are inherently confined to this world by their dualistic (material and time-bound) perception of things.

[40] [We? Narrator? Muhammad?:] <sup>36</sup>

"What you-all are worshipping/serving besides Him are nothing but names that you-all have named, you and your fathers! God has not sent down for them any authority. Certainly the DECISIVE-JUDGEMENT<sup>37</sup> is only for God! He commanded that you-all not worship/serve any but Him alone: That is THE UPRIGHT RELIGION<sup>38</sup> – and yet most of the people do not know!"

"O two companions of the Prison: As for one of you, he is pouring wine for his lord<sup>39</sup> to drink. And as for the other one, he is crucified, so that the birds are eating from his head. The matter has (already) been decreed which you are seeking to have me explain."

And he said to the one of the two whom he suspected was being saved:<sup>40</sup>

"Mention/remember me in the presence of your lord (rabb)!"

Then the Shaytân made him forget mentioning/remembering his RABB,<sup>41</sup> so he lingered in Prison several years.

And THE KING<sup>42</sup> said:

Surely I am seeing seven fat cows that seven

<sup>36</sup>In this verse the "addressees" are in the indefinite plural rather than the explicitly dual form used repeatedly in the preceding verses, so that it is not at all clear who is speaking to whom, or in what situation and time-frame.

<sup>37</sup>al-Hukm: see n. 27 above (where this quality is divinely bestowed on Joseph) concerning the manifold meanings of this Arabic root. Here the sense of (ontological) rulership and governing authority predominates (as with the closely related Arabic term sultân in the preceding sentence).

<sup>38</sup>al-dîn al-qayyim: this expression (also occurring at 9:36, 30:30 and 30:43) is part of a complex of related Qur'anic phrases powerfully affirming the unchanging unity of all realized "Religion" (al-dîn) as the proper relation between God and the human soul, the spiritual state of true "worship-and-divine-service" ('ibâda) exemplified by the prophets and saints.

<sup>39</sup>For those (including virtually all later Muslim interpreters) approaching this passage from within the perspective of the Qur'an itself, the image of "pouring wine" would naturally and very powerfully evoke the eschatological symbolism of the "banquets" (fountains, cupbearers, etc.) in the Garden (or Paradise) and the closely related symbolism of the divine "Court" ("Throne," "dignitaries," etc.) which is continued in the immediately following verses here. Similarly the complex symbolism of the "birds" mentioned in the Qur'an is often related (at least by later readers and commentators) specifically to the spiritual states of souls or other spiritual beings.

<sup>40</sup>The Arabic term here is used repeatedly (and almost exclusively) throughout the Qur'an to refer to God's "saving" the prophets, righteous, etc. in an explicitly spiritual or eschatological sense. Likewise, Joseph's parting words here clearly evoke the imagery of the intercession (shafâ'a) of the prophets and Messengers in the divine "Court" – usually within eschatological settings – alluded to in the Qur'an and described in greater detail in many well-known hadith.

<sup>41</sup>This literal translation strongly suggests – within the Qur'anic context, where "remembrance" or mindfulness of God (dhikr Allah) is mentioned almost three hundred times as a fundamental spiritual virtue – that it was Joseph who forgot to "remember" his Lord and therefore remained in the "Prison" of duality. Only by stretching the Arabic (and following the Biblical and legendary accounts, as is often the case in the later commentary literature) can one read this passage as somehow referring exclusively to the former prisoner.

<sup>42</sup>In order to grasp the deeper meanings of the story it is absolutely essential to keep in mind that throughout the Qur'an al-Malik, "The King" or "Possessor" of all creation, is one of the most frequent of the divine Names. (Cf. the similar case of the DEAR/MIGHTY-ONE, al-'Aziz, as the epithet of Joseph's earlier owner and Joseph's own title after his elevation by the King.) Of course no mention is made at all here of

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thin ones are eating, and seven green ears (of grain), and other dry ones. O you dignitaries,<sup>43</sup> explain to me about my vision, if you are (capable of) interpreting<sup>44</sup> the vision!"

They said:

"Mixed-up dreams!<sup>45</sup> And we are not, with regard to FINDING-THE-INNER-MEANING of dreams, among those who know."

[45] And he said, the one of the two who was saved and (only now) remembered after some time:

"I (intend to) inform you of its INNER-MEANING, so send me out."

[Then at the Prison he said:]

"Joseph, O you TRUTHFULLY-SPEAKING-ONE (al-siddiq): Explain to us regarding seven fat cows that seven thin ones are eating, and seven green ears and other dry ones, so that I might return to the people, so that perhaps they might know!"

He said:

"You-all plant for seven years, tirelessly. But of what you-all have harvested, leave it on the ear except for a very little, from which you eat."

"Then there come after that seven hard ones eating up what you-all have prepared for them, except for a very little from what you-all are preserving."

"Then there comes after that a year in which the people are abundantly helped out,<sup>46</sup> and in it they are pressing (much oil)."

[50] And the KING said:

"Bring him to me!"

Then when the messenger<sup>47</sup> came to him, he said:

"Return to your lord (rabb) and ask him:

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"Pharaoh" (fir'awn), the usual (and uniformly pejorative) title for the paramount Egyptian ruler in the rest of the stories of the Qur'an.

<sup>43</sup>al-mala': the term describing the assembled officials or nobles of a Court, which is also frequently used in the Qur'an (and hadith) to refer to the highest angels or archangels around the divine "Throne."

<sup>44</sup>The King uses an entirely different and more common expression ('ibâra) than the strange and metaphysically evocative term ta'wil ("INNER MEANING") consistently used by Jacob, Joseph and the two prisoners (see n. 16 above), although he does at least refer to his experience as a "vision" (ru'ya) rather than a "dream" (see following note). The root of 'ibâra refers to the "crossing over" from a particular significant form or experience to the meaning or lesson it contains, and is therefore used more broadly for any sort of "interpretation."

<sup>45</sup>This is the only reference to "dreams" in the entire Sura, all the other characters at least being aware that they are dealing with spiritual "vision" (ru'ya) in a far more profound sense. The contrast here dramatically highlights the constant theme of Reality and illusion – and of the rare spiritual "insight" (basîra: notes 69 and 81 below) and inspired wisdom needed to "see through" the "veils" of those immediate appearances – which provides the most basic thematic unity of this entire Sura.

<sup>46</sup>The Arabic root here refers literally to abundant rains, but is consistently used elsewhere in the Qur'an to refer more broadly to God's "Grace" – especially as it appears in response to human prayers and entreaties – in all of its forms. (Cf. the related notion of divine "sustenance," rizq, at n. 32 above.)

<sup>47</sup>al-rasûl: This is exactly the same term used hundreds of times in the Qur'an to refer to the "Messengers" of the divine King, the prophets and angels (and often to refer specifically to Muhammad).

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'What was the problem with those women who cut their hands?'"

[To himself?:]

"Certainly my Lord/RABB is WELL-KNOWING about their schemes!"

He (the King) said (to those women):

"What was going on with you-all when you tried to entice Joseph away from himself?!"

They said:

"God forbid – We didn't know any wrong of him!"

The wife of the DEAR/MIGHTY-ONE said:

"Now the Truth<sup>48</sup> has become clear. I did try to entice him away from himself, and surely he is among the TRUTHFULLY-SPEAKING-ONES."

[Joseph – apparently to himself:]

"That is so that he<sup>49</sup> might know that I did not betray him regarding the UNSEEN, and that God does not guide the scheming of those who betray."

"And I am not absolving my NAFS:<sup>50</sup> Surely the NAFS is commanding (us) to do wrong, except to the extent that my RABB has MERCY. Indeed my RABB is MOST-FORGIVING, MOST-LOVING-AND-MERCIFUL!"

And the KING said:

"Bring him to Me, so that I may have him WHOLLY DEVOTED to Myself!"

Then once He had spoken with him, He said:

"Today you are in Our presence, well settled and well trusted!"<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>**al-Haqq:** We have capitalized the translation here because the identical expression is also one of the highest or most comprehensive divine Names ("The Truly Real") throughout the Qur'an, and later Muslim interpreters sometimes took Zulaykha's exclamation here to refer to much more than the mere public disclosure of her treachery – i.e., as the sign of a dramatic spiritual process of maturation and growth, culminating in her recognition of the true reality of Joseph's nature and of her own love, comparable to the suffering and inner transformation later undergone by Joseph's brothers.

<sup>49</sup>The reference here is rather unclear and may be to Zulaykha's husband, the King, or perhaps even to God (there are problems with all three interpretations). In favor of the latter possibility is the fact that in the Qur'an the recurrent expression for "the unseen (spiritual) world" (**al-ghayb**) has to do with realities far broader (and quite different from) mere worldly "secrecy" and discretion. One of the central spiritual virtues in the Qur'an – most strikingly manifested by the figure of Jacob in this Sura – is that of being a "Guardian of the UNSEEN" (**Hafiz al-ghayb**): i.e., respectfully and appropriately responding to one's awareness of the spiritual world and the hidden reality of things at each moment, always observing the right behavior (**adab**) in one's relations with God and with each creature in a way that is appropriate to that soul's particular spiritual needs and capacity, while retaining the divine quality of "concealing" (**al-Sattâr**) most of his spiritual knowledge.

<sup>50</sup>Or "self," "soul," etc.: see the discussion of this highly problematic term in the note to n. 20 above.

<sup>51</sup>The diction of this entire verse (12:54), especially at the end, is powerfully reminiscent of the many Qur'anic scenes depicting the fate of the blessed standing before the divine "King" at the "Last Day." This eschatological resonance is so strong and so literal that it could not possibly escape any reader in the Arabic. Moreover, both the epithets bestowed on Joseph here (**amin**, **makîn**) frequently appear elsewhere in the Qur'an applied to Muhammad as divine Messenger (especially in Sura 26).

Dramatizing the Sura of Joseph

[55] He (Joseph) said:

"Place me over the TREASURIES OF THE EARTH.  
Indeed I am WELL-PROTECTING, WELL-KNOWING!"<sup>52</sup>

And that is how We established Joseph on the earth,  
settling down upon it wherever he wishes. We  
bestow Our LOVINGMERCY on whomever We wish.  
And We do not neglect the reward of the  
MUHSINUN!<sup>53</sup>

[Frame Narrator?/or still "We"?]:

And surely the reward of THE OTHER-WORLD is  
best, for those who had FAITH and were MINDFUL  
(of God)!<sup>54</sup>

And Joseph's brothers came. Then they entered before  
him and he knew them, while they were  
DENYING<sup>55</sup> him.

And when he had provided them with their supplies he  
said:

"Bring me from your father a (certain) brother  
of yours. Don't you-all see that I fill up the  
measure and I am the best of those-who-give-  
hospitality?!"

[60] "But if you don't bring him to me, then there is  
no measure for you with me – you may not come  
near me!"<sup>56</sup>

They said:

"We will try to entice<sup>57</sup> his father from

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<sup>52</sup>These last words (hafiz, 'alim) both appear frequently as divine Names throughout the Qur'an – thereby signaling Joseph's "investiture" here with the full Prophetic attributes; they also characterize the broader cosmological functions associated with the specific heavenly station of this prophet mentioned in the hadith of the Mi'raj. Likewise, the word "treasuries" (khazā'in) always refers elsewhere in the Qur'an to God's Treasuries: e.g., at 6:50; 11:31; 15:21; 17:100; 38:9; 52:37; and 63:7 ("God's are the Treasuries of the heavens and of the earth . . .").

<sup>53</sup>The middle of this verse (56) marks the exact midpoint of the Sura.

<sup>54</sup>The spiritual virtue of taqwā could perhaps be best translated as "active God-awareness": it is the consciousness and awareness of God's Presence, an inner mindfulness of the divine at every instant, combined with an eager, attentive orientation to do and accomplish in actual practice what that spiritual awareness demands. The Qur'an repeatedly mentions this (more than two hundred times) as one of the very highest spiritual states, most fully exemplified in the prophets and special "friends of God" (awliyā' Allāh).

<sup>55</sup>The underlying (and untranslatable) Arabic roots used here convey much more strongly the intended broader reference to spiritual "blindness" and the contrasting recognition of theophany (the divine "Signs"). The term translated here as "denying" (munkir) actually refers to the state of someone's (inwardly or outwardly) pretending not to know or recognize something that they really do know: cf. the closely related key Qur'anic concept of k-f-r, to "cover up" or ungratefully refuse the ultimate Reality of the soul's relation to God (see note to verse 37 above). Confirming the same metaphysical point, "knew" here translates the root 'r-f, referring specifically to the familiar experience of our "recognition" of a person we actually already know.

<sup>56</sup>Here, in the larger Qur'anic context, the Arabic expression evokes much more strongly than any possible English translation the many Qur'anic references to the central notion of each soul's relative "proximity" (qurba) to God, which is often discussed in terms of imagery (such as the divine "Throne," courtiers, etc.) drawn from court protocol and etiquette.

<sup>57</sup>The brothers here used precisely the same (pejorative) term that was earlier used to describe the "scheming" of Zulaykha and her friends to get Joseph to go against his own better inclinations. The irony in the brothers' response is that they are of course already deeply implicated in the process of repeating with Benjamin what they had earlier done with Joseph.

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(holding on to) him: Certainly we are doing (that)!"

And he said to his young servants:

"Put their trading-goods back in their saddlepacks, so that they may recognize them when they have gone back to their family – that perhaps they may return."

So when they returned to their father they said:

"O our father,<sup>58</sup> the measure (of grain requested) was forbidden to us. So send our brother with us that we may be given the measure. Surely we are protecting him!"

He said:

"Can I have faith in you regarding him – except as I had faith in you regarding his brother before!"

[To himself?:]

"For God is BEST-IN-PROTECTING, and He is the MOST LOVING OF THOSE SHOWING LOVINGMERCY (arham al-râhimîn)!"

[65] But when they opened their possessions they found their trading-goods returned to them. They said:

"O our father, what (more) do we desire? These are our own trading-goods returned to us! And we will provide for our family and protect our brother and increase (our provisions) by the measure of a camel-load. That is an easy measure!"

He said:

"I will never send him with you-all until you give me a pledge from God that you will most surely bring him back to me, unless you are surrounded!"

So when they had given him their pledge he said:

"GOD is TRUSTEE (wakîl) for what we are saying!"

And he said:

"O my sons, don't go in through a single gate, but enter through separate gates! And I cannot help you, in place of God, with regard to any thing. The DECISIVE-JUDGMENT (al-hukm) is only for God: in Him have I trusted, and on Him should rely all-those-who-trust (al-mutawakkilûn)!"<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>Here, as throughout the rest of the Sura, the brothers continue to use the same formal and "objective" form of addressing their father, as opposed to the intimate and personal, diminutive form always used in the exchanges between Joseph and Jacob (verses 4-5 and 100). Exactly the same contrast is mirrored in the ways Joseph and Jacob (as opposed to the other characters) address God and especially their personal RABB (see nns. 11 and 14 above). Ironically, the brothers' words at the end of this verse literally reproduce their earlier assurances to Jacob regarding Joseph in verse 12.

<sup>59</sup>Tawakkul, repeatedly encouraged in the Qur'an, is the spiritual station of total trust and confidence in God, the inner attitude of sincerely "handing things over" totally to Him, as a departing traveling or pilgrim would entrust their family and affairs to a trusted servant or steward (wakîl).

## Dramatizing the Sura of Joseph

And when they entered in the way their father had commanded them, that was not of any help to them, in place of God, with regard to any thing – except as a need in Jacob's NAFS which he satisfied.

And surely he is a possessor of (divine) KNOWING through what We have made him KNOW – and yet most of the people do not know!

And when they entered before Joseph, he made his brother his (special) guest.<sup>60</sup> He said:  
"Indeed I myself am your own brother! So do not be upset about what they have been doing."

[70] Then when he had provided them with their supplies, he put the drinkingcup in his brother's saddlebag.

Next a herald called out:  
"O you of the caravan, indeed you-all are surely thieves!"

They said, as they came (back) close to them:  
"What is it you are missing!?"

They said:  
"We are missing the King's chalice!"

"For whoever brings it there is a camel's load (in reward), and I am responsible for it" [added Joseph].

They said:  
"By God, you-all surely know we didn't come to do harm in the earth and we haven't been thieves!"

They said:  
"Then what are the amends for it, if you-all have been lying?"

[75] They said:  
"The amends for it are the person in whose saddlebag it is found – let him be the compensation for it: that is how we repay the wrongdoers!"

So he began with their sacks before his brother's sack, and then he brought it out of his brother's sack.

That is how We contrived for Joseph: he would not have taken his brother according to the religion<sup>61</sup> of the King, except that God wishes. We raise up

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<sup>60</sup>The Arabic verb used here and at verse 99 (with the ordinary sense of giving lodging or refuge) also has strong eschatological overtones in the Qur'anic context, since its locative form (al-ma'wâ) is repeatedly used in vivid eschatological passages to refer to the "ultimate abode" of both the blessed and those subject to torment, whether in the "Gardens" or the "Fire."

<sup>61</sup>Din here could also mean "law," "custom," "judgement" and the like – keeping in mind what has already been said about the likely meaning of "The King" at verse 43 above.

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by degrees whomever We wish, and above every  
possessor of knowledge is ONE ALL-KNOWING!<sup>62</sup>

They said:

"If he is stealing, then a brother of his had  
stolen before!"

But Joseph kept it secret within himself and did not  
reveal it to them. He said (to himself):

"You yourselves are in a far worse situation, and God  
is MORE KNOWING about what you describe!"

They said:

"O DEAR/MIGHTY-ONE,<sup>63</sup> he has a father, an  
extremely old man,<sup>64</sup> so take one of us instead of  
him. Certainly we see you are among the  
MUHSINUN!"

He said:

"God forbid that we should take anyone except  
the person with whom we found our things!  
Otherwise we would surely be wrongdoers!"

[80] So then when they had despaired of (persuading)  
him, they got away to talk in secret. The oldest  
of them said:

"Don't you-all know that your father took a  
pledge from you with God, and before how you  
were so remiss with regard to Joseph?! So I will  
never leave (this) earth until my father gives me  
permission or God judges for me, for He is the  
BEST OF THOSE-WHO-JUDGE!"

"You-all return to your father and say:  
'O our father, your son has certainly stolen.  
And we have only given witness to what we have  
come to know: we were not protecting the  
UNSEEN!'"

"And ask the village where we were and the  
caravan in which we came back: indeed we are  
surely SPEAKING-TRUTHFULLY!"<sup>65</sup>

He (Jacob) said:

"No, on the contrary: your carnal souls (your  
'NAFS') have seduced you into some affair! So  
SABR is beautiful.<sup>66</sup> Perhaps God may bring them

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<sup>62</sup>Commentators disagree whether this famous last phrase refers only to God (as it is translated here), or also – if one understands the last phrase as "someone more knowing" – to the existence of much wider earthly and/or spiritual hierarchies of religious or other knowledge. However, in the Qur'an itself these frequently mentioned "degrees" or "ranks" (darajât, appearing some fourteen times) most often seem to refer specifically to spiritual qualities, functions or reward in the other world (e.g., "with their Lord," at 8:4).

<sup>63</sup>al-'Aziz: Joseph is addressed here with the same title (and divine Name) as the Egyptian official who earlier bought him and raised him until his imprisonment.

<sup>64</sup>Or "a great shaykh": shaykh kabir.

<sup>65</sup>This passage is an excellent illustration of the sort of "cinematic" leaps through time and space that are fairly typical of Qur'anic narrative: it is not at all clear whether this verse is simply a continuation of the brother's advice in the preceding verse or whether the scene has already shifted to the brothers' return to Jacob and their embarrassed explanations.

<sup>66</sup>Note that Jacob's answer up to this point is literally identical with his much earlier response to the brothers in verse 18, after they had left Joseph in the well.

## Dramatizing the Sura of Joseph

to me all together. For He is THE ALL-KNOWING,  
THE ALL-WISE."

And he turned away from them and said:  
"O my grief for Joseph!"

And his eyes had become white (blind) from sorrow,  
for he was restraining himself.

[85] They said:  
"By God, you won't stop remembering Joseph  
until you waste away, or join those who pass  
away!"

He said (to himself?):

"I only complain to God of my grief and my sorrow.  
And I know from God what you-all do not know."

"O my sons, go and try to find out<sup>67</sup> about Joseph  
and his brother. And do not despair of THE SPIRIT  
OF GOD! NO ONE despairs of THE SPIRIT OF GOD, but  
the group who reject (God)."

So when they entered before him they said:

"O DEAR/MIGHTY-ONE, we and our family have  
been beset by hardship, and we have brought  
unworthy goods! So fill up the measure for us,  
and be charitable<sup>68</sup> with us: surely God rewards  
those who are charitable!"

He said:

"Did you-all know what you did with Joseph  
and his brother, when you were foolish-and-  
ignorant?"

[90] They said:  
"Is it really you who are Joseph?!"

He said:

"I am Joseph, and this is my brother. God has  
been generous with us."

[Narrator?/"We"?/Joseph to himself?]

"For whoever is MINDFUL (of God) and shows  
SABR, surely God does not neglect the reward  
of the MUHSINUN."

They said:

"By God, God has preferred you over us,  
though we were certainly erring ones."

He said:

"No blame for you today! God forgives you –

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<sup>67</sup>The verb here, from the root meaning "to have sympathy, feel, sense," also conveys such meanings as: to sense, feel deeply, experience, perceive, etc. A more literal translation, which also suggests much more the spiritual depth of what Jacob is urging on the brothers, might be: "try to feel for yourselves . . ."

<sup>68</sup>There is an important and untranslatable ironic play on words here: we have translated literally – as the brothers surely intend it – the everyday meaning of the fifth derived verbal form of the key Arabic root s-d-q (discussed in n. 19 above). However, that same verbal form also carries the deeper meaning of "reciprocally or intensively practicing or carrying out the spiritual virtue of truthfully speaking and acting (sidq)" – and the brothers are of course still entirely unaware of how profoundly and sincerely Joseph is actually carrying out what for them is simply a standard pious formula used by beggars!

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and He is the MOST LOVING OF THOSE SHOWING  
LOVINGMERCY.”

“Go all of you, with this shirt of mine, then place it  
on my father’s face, that he may come SEEING.<sup>69</sup>  
And come to me with your family, all together!”

And when the caravan started out, their father said:

“Surely I do feel the smell<sup>70</sup> of Joseph – even  
if you think I’m losing my mind!”

[95] They said:

“By God, certainly you are in your old error!”

Then when the bearer of good news arrived, he placed it  
[the shirt] on his face, so that he was returned to  
BEING-SEEING.

He said:

“Didn’t I tell you that I KNOW from God what  
you-all do not know?”

They said:

“O our father, ask for our sins to be forgiven  
for us – indeed we were erring ones!”

He said:

“I will ask my RABB to forgive you. Certainly  
He is THE MOST-FORGIVING, THE MOST-  
MERCIFUL!”<sup>71</sup>

Then when they entered before Joseph, he received both  
his parents<sup>72</sup> as his (special) guests, and he said:

“Enter Egypt, if God wishes, in security!”<sup>73</sup>

[100] And he raised up both his parents upon the  
Throne, and they (the brothers) fell down bowing  
before him.<sup>74</sup> And he said:

“O my dear father, this is the INNER-MEANING OF  
my vision from before! My RABB did make it  
real-and-true. And He was good to me when He  
pulled me out of the Prison and He brought you-  
all in from the desert, after the Shaytân had  
incited conflict between me and my brothers.

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<sup>69</sup>Basir: in the Qur’an this term (also an important and repeated divine Name) and related forms are clearly used more than a hundred times to refer specifically to spiritual “vision,” insight and discernment, often explicitly described as a divinely given grace or inspiration. The “restoration” of Jacob’s (physical?) vision here of course recalls the constantly dramatized contrast throughout this Sura between real divine “vision,” ru’ya, and empty or illusory dreams, ahlâm.

<sup>70</sup>Rîh: a term closely related in meaning and its verbal root to the divine “Spirit” or “Breath” (Rûh Allâh) of verse 87 and many other key Qur’anic passages.

<sup>71</sup>Literally echoing Joseph’s exact words at the similarly climactic moment of verse 53.

<sup>72</sup>The dual form here and in the following verse is not further explained: presumably many Qur’anic auditors (with no knowledge of the Biblical details of Rachel’s death, the names and mothers of Joseph’s brothers, etc.) assumed a reference to Joseph’s biological parents. However, within the Sura itself it is important to note that the very same dual form appears only one other time, at the very beginning (verse 6), in reference to Abraham and Isaac.

<sup>73</sup>Or “with FAITH”: see n. 8 above.

<sup>74</sup>This last phrase (applied here to the brothers, not to the “two parents”) is used repeatedly in the Qur’an specifically to describe the actions or inner state of those who directly witness and recognize the-ophanies (manifestations of God), whether in the case of Moses at Sinai (7:143) or of those who truly hear verses of the Qur’an (17:107; 19:58; 25:73; 32:15).

## Dramatizing the Sura of Joseph

Surely my RABB is MOST-GRACIOUS (latif) to whatever He wills! Indeed He is THE ALL-KNOWING, THE ALL-WISE!<sup>75</sup>

“O my RABB, You have brought to me some (worldly) dominion and You have caused me to KNOW through FINDING-THE-INNER-MEANING of what-comes-to-be!

“O CREATOR<sup>76</sup> of the heavens and the earth! You are my PROTECTING-FRIEND (wali in this world and the other-world. Come to receive me surrendered (to You),<sup>77</sup> and include me with THOSE WHO-DO-WHAT-IS-RIGHT!”

That was from the disclosures of the UNSEEN We inspire in you.<sup>78</sup> You were not present with them when they agreed together about their affair,<sup>79</sup> while they were slyly devising.

And most of the people, even though you greatly desire (it), do not have FAITH.

Nor do you ask of them any reward for it. It is only a REMINDER (dhikr) to the worlds!

[105] And how many a SIGN there is in the heavens and the earth which they pass on by, turning away!

And most of them have NO FAITH in God, except while they are associating (other appearances with the One).

So do they feel safe<sup>80</sup> from their being overwhelmed by a dark shroud of punishment from God, or from the HOUR suddenly overcoming them while they are not even aware?!

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<sup>75</sup>Here in conclusion Joseph echoes literally, but now based on his own personal experience, the similar affirmations of the divine Teacher/Narrator at verse 6 and of his own prophet-father at verse 83.

<sup>76</sup>Fâtir (literally, “Splitter”), one of the more unusual Qur’anic terms (appearing in five other Suras) for “Creator” – perhaps focusing on the aspect of giving the creatures their “primordial nature” (fitra).

<sup>77</sup>Forms of the verb tawaffâ are usually used in the Qur’an to refer very specifically to the divine or angelic “reception” of each soul at the moment of death. The expression muslim and closely related terms (taslim/islâm) are most commonly used in the Qur’an – as in this passage – to refer to one of the highest spiritual states or virtues most fully exemplified in the prophets: “The peace that passeth understanding” (salâm) and the inner union of the divine and human will that leads to that peace, true spiritual “surrender.”

<sup>78</sup>This and the following verses would appear to be directed to Muhammad, shifting back from Joseph. Of course in all such Qur’anic cases the relation of this often mysterious supra-temporal “you” to each listener/reader is something that remains to be discovered.

<sup>79</sup>The language here is identical with the description of Joseph’s brothers’ plotting or scheming at verse 15 above.

<sup>80</sup>Playing with the same Arabic root as the word for “faith” (imân: n. 18 above).

Say: "This is my Path: I am calling/praying to God with CLEAR INSIGHT,<sup>81</sup> myself and whoever has followed me. And Praise be to God! I am not among those-who-associate (others with the One)."

And We did not send (any as Messenger) before you except for some men whom We inspire among the people of the towns.

Have they not traveled through the earth, that they might observe how the ultimate end of those before them has been?! Indeed the Abode of the-other-world is best, for THOSE-WHO-ARE-MINDFUL! So then do you-all still not understand?!

[110] Until, when the Messengers despaired and supposed that they had been rejected, there came to them Our TRIUMPHANT-SUPPORT<sup>82</sup> and whoever We wish was saved. Nor can Our Affliction be kept from those-who-do-harm.

Surely in the tales about them there was a deep-lesson for THOSE WHO HAVE HEARTS!<sup>83</sup>

It was not a made-up story, but a confirmation of what was (already) before him<sup>84</sup> and a proper-distinguishing (tafsil) of every thing, and RIGHT-GUIDANCE and LOVINGMERCY to a people who have FAITH.

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<sup>81</sup>This Qur'anic expression ('alâ basîra) usually applied to the special divine guidance of the prophets and saints is closely related to the term for Jacob's restored "vision" or spiritual insight (basîr: see related note at verse 96 above).

<sup>82</sup>In the Qur'an, the term nasr (and related verbal forms) is typically used (especially where the prophets and their supporters are concerned) to refer to all the forms of divine or spiritual support and assistance. In consequence, the meaning of "victory" or "triumph" also conveyed by the same Arabic root must often be understood in such contexts in a more strictly spiritual (and not necessarily outwardly visible or historical) sense.

<sup>83</sup>The expression *ûlû al-albâb* occurs some sixteen times in the Qur'an, always in reference to that spiritual elite who are actually ready to realize the spiritual virtues, who alone are truly capable of recognizing the divine "Signs" and thereby "remembering" and returning to God (13:19, 39:3, etc.).

<sup>84</sup>Again, especially given the extraordinary scope of the meaning and importance attributed to these "stories," the person actually intended here (as well as their relation to the narrator) is not at all clear: it might be Joseph, or Muhammad (now considered from "outside"), or each reader/listener – although there are problems with each of these possible identifications.

## Dramatizing the Sura of Joseph

### Appendix: The Spiritual Categories Involved in The Divine "Lessons"

#### Spiritual Virtues

those who-question-and-inquire (verse 7)

doing-what-is-right and appropriate (9,101)  
sincerely meaning-well (11, 46)  
guarding and protecting (12, 55, 63, 64, 65, 81)

those speaking-truthfully (17, 26, 27, 46, 51, 82)  
those who have faith (17, 57, 64, 111)  
"Beautiful SABR" (18, 83)

"most of the people" (Negatively: 21, 38, 40, 68)  
[and "the people" (neutral or positive: 38, 46, 49)]

the MUHSINUN (22, 36, 56, 78, 90, 100)

Those who truly-flourish (23)  
[God's "scheming": 76]  
forgiving/seeking forgiveness (29, 92, 97, 98)

the lowly ones (32)

Remembering (God: dhikr) (42, 45)

KNOWING ("from God") (6, 21, 22, 37, 55, 68, 76, 83, 96, 100)  
those who are MINDFUL (of God) (57, 90, 109)

those who give hospitality (59)  
those-who-trust (in God) (66, 67)

those who are charitable (88)  
those who are SEEING (93, 96, 108)  
those having (divine) SECURITY (99, 107)  
surrendered (to God) (101)

#### Their Contraries

the heedless-ones (verses 3, 13)

those gone astray (8, 30, 95)

those suffering loss (14)  
the unaware (15, 107)  
"night-blind"/dimsighted (16)

the not-knowing (21, 40, 44, 51, 68, 80, 81, 86, 97)

the wrongdoers (23, 75, 79)

the scheming ones (28, 50, 52, 102)

the erring ones (29, 91, 97)

the ignorant-and-foolish ones (33, 89)  
not having faith (37, 103, 106)  
rejecting (God/next-world) (37, 87)  
not giving thanks (38)  
forgetting (42)  
those who betray (52)

those who deny/don't recognize (58, 87)

those who pass away (85)  
those who despair (87, 110)

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**calling/praying (God) (108)**

**praising (God) (108)**

**observing/reflecting (on SIGNS) (109)**

**those who have (purified) HEARTS (111)**

**those turning away/passing by (105)**

**those "associating" (others with God) (106, 108)**

**those who don't understand (109)**

**those who do harm (110)**

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those turning away/passing by (105)  
those "associating" (others with God) (106, 108)

calling/praying (God) (108)  
praising (God) (108)  
observing/reflecting (on SIGNS) (109)

those who don't understand (109)  
those who do harm (110)

those who have (purified) HEARTS (111)