

Section 5: Yusuf Preaches Unity of Allah in the Prison

Surah Yusuf – Verse 36

وَدَخَلَ مَعَهُ السَّجْنَ فَتَيَانِ قَالَ أَحَدُهُمَا إِنِّي أَرَانِي أَعْصِرُ خَمْرًا وَقَالَ الْآخَرُ إِنِّي
أَرَانِي أَحْمِلُ فَوْقَ رَأْسِي خُبْزًا تَأْكُلُ الطَّيْرُ مِنْهُ نَبَأْنَا بِتَأْوِيلِهِ إِنَّا نَرَاكَ مِنَ
الْمُحْسِنِينَ

36. “And with him there entered into the prison two youths. One of them said (unto Yusuf): ‘I saw (in dream) myself pressing wine’ The other said: ‘I saw (in my dream) myself carrying on my head bread from which the birds were eating.’ Tell us its interpretations, verily we see you of the righteous ones’.”

Among those who entered into prison with Yusuf, there were two young men, as the verse says:

“And with him there entered into the prison two youths...”

Man's other senses usually become more active in obtaining information when his direct channels of communication and direct access to information are obstructed. In such cases his dreams can provide him with an alternative means.

It is for this reason that it is said that the two men, one of whom was the man responsible for the ruler's buffet, and the other, for his catering services. They approached Yusuf in the prison to describe the wonderful dreams they had seen the previous night.

It is important to note that they were imprisoned because of the false accusations of their enemies who

claimed that they were about to poison the king.

Each one of the two prisoners recalled his dream to Yusuf for his interpretation in a manner as the verse says:

“...One of them said (unto Yusuf): ‘I saw (in dream) myself pressing wine’ The other said: ‘I saw (in my dream) myself carrying on my head bread from which the birds were eating.’...”

Then, they added to their statement unto Yusuf:

“...Tell us its interpretations, verily we see you of the righteous ones’.”

Some Issues to Remember

1. An Islamic tradition denotes that the reason why they called Yusuf a truly righteous person was because he used to always take care of the sick and the needy in the prison and find accommodation for others.¹
2. We must take dreams seriously, for there are secrets hidden in some of them.
3. Once the people have confidence in someone, they tend to share all their secrets with him.
4. Enlightened people also leave their impact and influence upon others even when they are confined in prison.
5. Even guilty people tend to have a high esteem for those who are truly righteous.

Surah Yusuf – Verse 37

قَالَ لَا يَأْتِيكُمَا طَعَامٌ تُرْزَقَانِهِ إِلَّا نَبَّأْتُكُمَا بِتَأْوِيلِهِ قَبْلَ أَنْ يَأْتِيَكُمَا ذَلِكُمَا مِمَّا عَلَّمَنِي رَبِّي إِنِّي تَرَكْتُ مِلَّةَ قَوْمٍ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَهُمْ بِالْآخِرَةِ هُمْ كَافِرُونَ

37. “He said: ‘There shall not come to you the food with which you are fed but I will inform you both of its interpretation before it comes to you. This is of what my Lord has taught me. Verily, I have abandoned the religion of a people who do not believe in Allah and they are disbelievers in the Hereafter’.”

In the first part of the verse, it is probable that the Qur’an is hinting that Yusuf said he also knew from the side of Allah what kind of food that would be served to them, and that he could also interpret their dreams just as easily.

In this case, the implication would be that in addition to interpreting dreams, Yusuf also knew about other things as well, which he used to foretell. This ability is similar to that of Hadrat Isa (as) who used to read the minds of those around him regarding what they used to eat or what they had stored in their houses.

Question: Why did Hadrat Yusuf (as) not interpret their dreams then and there but postpone their interpretation for later?

Fakhr Razi provides the answer to this question as follows:

1. He wanted to make them wait so that he could advise, admonish, and convert them, perhaps that person might believe before his execution.
2. He wanted to build up their confidence by foretelling the kind of food before the food had been served.
3. He wanted to tantalize them so that they would lend their ears more carefully to what he had to say.
4. As the interpretation of one of the dreams was that that person was going to be executed, Yusuf was postponing the issue so that that person might not lose heart too suddenly.

At any rate, Yusuf, who would not miss any opportunity to provide guidance and counseling, made the most of the two prisoners' requests for the interpretation of their dreams, and used them as a means for introducing and explaining important facts which were helpful not only for their lives, but also for all human beings.

At first, in order to build their confidence, he told them that he would tell them the meanings of their dreams before their food had arrived.

The verse says:

“He said: ‘There shall not come to you the food with which you are fed but I will inform you both of its interpretation before it comes to you..’”

Then, the faithful and theistic Yusuf, whose whole entity was filled with Monotheism, made it quite clear that this knowledge of interpreting dreams was among those things taught him by Allah and that nothing could take place without His Will.

The verse continues saying:

“...This is of what my Lord has taught me...”

To counter any misconception that the Almighty would give anything to anyone without conditions, he added that he had abandoned the way of those who did not believe in Allah and the Day of Resurrection, alluding to the idol worshipping people of Egypt and Kan'an, and that it was this enlightening faith and virtue which made him deserve such a blessing.

The verse says:

“... Verily, I have abandoned the religion of a people who do not believe in Allah and they are disbelievers in the Hereafter’.”

The Messages Conveyed in this Verse:

1. In order to impress others more deeply, it is sometimes necessary to show one's scientific ability and knowledge and one's perfections and virtues.
2. He who escapes the dark shadows of polytheism, arrives at the enlightenment of knowledge and Truth.
3. Belief in monotheism and resurrection along with other doctrines is a requirement in all religions.
4. The basis of faith rests upon distancing oneself from polytheism and unbelief /tabarri/ and reliance upon the saints of Allah, as is mentioned in the verse quoted above and the next verse, saying:

“... Verily, I have abandoned the religion of a people who do not believe in Allah...” “And I have followed the religion of my fathers, 'Ibrahim...”

Surah Yusuf – Verse 38

وَاتَّبَعْتُ مِلَّةَ آبَائِي إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ مَا كَانَ لَنَا أَنْ نُشْرِكَ بِاللَّهِ مِنْ شَيْءٍ ذَلِكَ مِنْ فَضْلِ اللَّهِ عَلَيْنَا وَعَلَى النَّاسِ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَشْكُرُونَ

38. “And I have followed the religion of my fathers, 'Ibrahim, Ishaq and Ya'qub. And it beseems us not to associate aught with Allah. That is of Allah's favor upon us and upon mankind, but most people do not give thanks.”

Since hereditary nobility plays an important role in the formation of the character of an individual, it also has a very important role when people are to accept a person.

Therefore, Hadrat Yusuf introduces himself by presenting his illustrious lineage of forefathers, all of whom were Divine prophets, confirming, at the same time, his sanctified message. This is exactly the same method which the Prophet (S) used to employ in introducing himself.

He used to say, that he was the same oft mentioned Prophet whose name had been mentioned in both the Torah and the Gospels.

Hadrat Sayyid-ush-Shuhada, Hussein ibn Ali (as) and Imam Sajjad (as) also introduced themselves to

the people in Karbala and Syria as the children of Fatimat–az–Zahra (as), saying:

'I am the son of Fatimat–az–Zahra'.

The Arabic term /millat/ has been applied in the Qur'an with the sense of religion. And in verse 78 of Surah Hajj, the profile of the religion of 'Ibrahim /millata 'Ibrahim/ has been depicted as:

“And strive hard in (the way of), such a striving as is due to Him; He has chosen you, and has not laid upon you any hardship in religion – the faith of your father 'Ibrahim. It is He Who has named you Muslims, both before and in this (revelation).....So establish the regular prayer, do give regular Charity, and hold fast to Allah!”

Turning ones back to the ways of divine prophets and adhering to polytheism is ingratitude due to the blessings of Allah. Therefore, we must dissociate ourselves from such ideas, as they go against the inherent good which is found in human nature. Abraham said:

“And I have followed the religion of my fathers, 'Ibrahim, Ishaq and Ya'qub...”

Hadrat Yusuf is not only a descendent by blood lineage, he is also an inheritor of a spiritual lineage as well, thus it does not behoove him to associate anyone with Allah, and this monotheistic pedigree goes back to the iconoclastic 'Ibrahim. This is one of the Divine blessings sent upon the family of 'Ibrahim and upon all people, for that matter.

The verse says:

“...And it beseems us not to associate aught with Allah. That is of Allah's favor upon us and upon mankind...”

Unfortunately, most people do not thank Allah for all these blessings and deviate from the Right Path. The verse says:

“...but most people do not give thanks.”

Incidentally, it is worthy to note that these verses show that despite the fact that Yusuf (as) used to live among those idol – worshippers, Allah, the Magnificent, has nowhere mentioned that this respectable and worthy person ever called on the people to be monotheistic and worship the One God, except in this verse where he has extended the invitation to the two prisoners who were with him in prison.

It seems that he was not at all optimistic about the people of Egypt lending their ears to him, let alone accepting his message.

However, when he noticed that these two individuals took him as a righteous and decent man of good conduct, and they turned to him, a glimmer of hope and success appeared in his heart that they might probably listen to him and accept him.

As a result, he proceeded to call them to the worship of Allah and thus be converted to the faith of monotheism.

In the narrations it is said that these prisoners told Yusuf that as soon as they saw him, they had become interested in him and began to love him greatly.

Yusuf answered that they would better not love him or express any affection for him, for, according to him, the catastrophes that had been inflicted upon him was because of friendship, and whoever had loved him somehow caused him some sort of disaster.

His aunt had loved him and she accused him to theft. His father had loved him, and because of this, he was thrown down to the bottom of the well. The wife of the 'Aziz had loved him and because of that he was put in prison.

Surah Yusuf – Verse 39

يَا صَاحِبِي السَّجْنِ أَأَرْبَابٌ مُتَفَرِّقُونَ خَيْرٌ أَمِ اللَّهُ الْوَاحِدُ الْقَهَّارُ

39. “O my (two) mates of the prison! Are (many) diverse lords better, or Allah, the One, the All-Dominant?”

Men are of three different types: One group is flexible like the air which has no form or shape and is so volatile that it can naturally fill any container regardless of its size, shape, or structure.

The second group is inflexible and resistant in all its aspects, like iron and steel which can withstand all kinds of pressure from the outside. The third group is composed of leaders and pioneers who seek to convert everything into what Allah has ordained. Yusuf is an example of the third group, seeking to convert polytheists into monotheism even in the prison.

In different occurrences of the Sublime Qur'an, we find that it has employed the method of comparing ideas supporting true monotheism and unbelief, some examples of which, concerning Allah, we present below.

1) “It there any of your partners (whom you ascribe unto Allah that) can originate creation, then bring it back again?”²

2) “It there any of your partners (whom you ascribe unto Allah) one (that) leads towards the Truth?”³

3) “Shall I seek a lord other than Allah while He is the Lord of everything?”⁴

4) “Is Allah better, or what they associate (with Him)?”⁵

Explanations

1. Call people to the true faith with love and affection.
2. Use opportune places and times for the propagation of religion.

(As soon as Yusuf realizes that they require him to interpret their dreams, he takes the opportunity to propagate the faith.)

3. Queries and comparisons are often channels of both communication and guidance.

Surah Yusuf – Verse 40

مَا تَعْبُدُونَ مِنْ دُونِهِ إِلَّا أَسْمَاءَ سَمَّيْتُمُوهَا أَنْتُمْ وَءَابَاؤُكُمْ مَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ بِهَا مِنْ سُلْطَانٍ إِنْ الْحُكْمُ إِلَّا لِلَّهِ أَمَرَ أَلَّا تَعْبُدُوا إِلَّا إِيَّاهُ ذَلِكَ الدِّينُ الْقَيِّمُ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

40. “You do not worship besides Him but (mere) names which you have named, you and your fathers, for which Allah has not sent down any authority. Judgment belongs only to Allah. He has commanded that you worship none but Him. That is the right religion, but most people do not know.”

Those who are worshipped other than Him are not the substantial and real objects of worship. On the contrary, they are the products of man’s own imagination or that of his ancestors.

One’s ideas must be either based upon rational demonstration or they must have the traditions as their firm foundation. Therefore, one must not bow to any command other than those issued from Divine sources, for issuing commands and decrees are the sole prerogatives of Allah.

All laws are legally unstable, except Divine laws.

Ignorance and the lack of knowledge pave the way for idol worship. Most people who are ignorant suffer from conscious ignorance and are aware of their own lack of knowledge, or they suffer from unconscious ignorance thinking they know while in actual fact they do not know.

The honor and respect that we bestow upon powerful individuals and organizations, protocols, pomp meetings, supports, condemnations, and circumstance are nothing but fictitious titles and modern icons which we ourselves have created and have tried to relate to them instead of the Divinity as if they were

realities.

In reality, however, this fact must be believed that ***“It is only He who is worthy of governing”*** so one must never surrender to icons and despots and bow to them. One must believe in monotheism in all its dimensions: in worship, in government, in culture, and in all things.

The verse says:

“You do not worship besides Him but (mere) names which you have named, you and your fathers, for which Allah has not sent down any authority. Judgment belongs only to Allah. He has commanded that you worship none but Him...”

This is the direct and sustaining Divine way of life. However, most people are not aware of this and owing to this lack of awareness, they deviate from the right path, going astray in idol worship and surrendering to non – Divine governments.

Consequently, they suffer tortures, deprivations, and disasters as a result of their choice of the wrong path of life. The verse says:

“...That is the right religion, but most people do not know.”

Surah Yusuf – Verse 41

يَا صَاحِبِ السِّجْنِ أَمَّا أَحَدُكُمَا فَيَسْقِي رَبَّهُ خَمْرًا وَأَمَّا الْآخَرُ فَيُصْلَبُ فَتَأْكُلُ
الطَّيْرُ مِنْ رَأْسِهِ قُضِيَ الْأَمْرُ الَّذِي فِيهِ تَسْتَفْتِيَانِ

41. “O’ my (two) mates of the prison! as for one of you, he shall pour out wine for his lord to drink; whereas the other will be crucified and the birds shall eat on his head. The matter is decreed about which you do enquire.”

The Arabic term /rabb/ is also applied for governor, as well as lord in the Arabic phrase: /rabbud dar/ which means: the lord of the house or the owner. Therefore, the phrase /fayasqi rabbahu xamra/ means: ‘he gives wine to his lord.’

From here on, he begins interpreting the dreams of those two prisoners, but before this Yusuf had preached them Monotheism and then he expressed his miracle for them. He began with the interpretation of the butler.

It has been narrated that the first prisoner had also seen three bunches of grapes in his dream. Hadrat Yusuf said that they meant that that prisoner would remain in prison for three more days and he would

return to his original profession on the fourth day.

The other prisoner on the other hand, who had been the King's cook, had seen three bags instead. Yusuf said that they also meant that he would stay in prison for three more days, but his end was much more gloomy. The king would take him out of the prison after that and had him hanged where the birds could eat on his head.

The verse from the tongue of Yusuf says:

“O’ my (two) mates of the prison! as for one of you, he shall pour out wine for his lord to drink; whereas the other will be crucified and the birds shall eat on his head. The matter is decreed about which you do enquire.”

It is said that the latter, on hearing the interpretation, said that he had not dreamed at all and he had been only joking. Yusuf (as) then told him that his fate had been decreed and what was said had to be fulfilled.

From these accounts it is evident that Yusuf (as) had received the news from the invisible world revealed to him; not as the dreams other people usually interpret.

Surah Yusuf – Verse 42

وَقَالَ لِلَّذِي ظَنَّ أَنَّهُ نَاجٍ مِّنْهُمَا اذْكُرْنِي عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ فَأَنَسَاهُ الشَّيْطَانُ ذِكْرَ رَبِّهِ فَلَبِثَ
فِي السِّجْنِ بِضْعَ سِنِينَ

42. “And he said to him whom he knew would be saved of the two: ‘Mention me to your lord.’ However, Satan caused him to forget to mention him to his lord, so he (Yusuf) remained in prison a few years.”

The Arabic word /zann/ is employed with several different meanings. In certain circumstances it is used to mean ‘belief’ and ‘knowledge’, because Yusuf had explicitly and decisively foretold the forthcoming release of one prisoner, and the execution of the other. Therefore, the word /zann/ does not mean ‘suspicion’ in this verse, which is the usual meaning of the term.

The Arabic term /bid’/ refers to any number less than 10, which has led most commentators to believe that the number of years of Yusuf imprisonment had amounted to 7 years.

In some commentaries, the Qur’anic sentence /fa’ansah-uş-şaytanu/ has been interpreted to mean that Satan took Allah out of the mind of Yusuf when he took recourse to the king’s cup bearer for assistance instead of turning to Allah and therefore, he had forgotten Allah, which was a ‘leaving the better’ for

Yusuf and he had to stay in prison for several more years for that.

The verse says:

***“And he said to him whom he knew would be saved of the two: ‘Mention me to your lord.’
However, Satan caused him to forget to mention him to his lord, so he (Yusuf) remained in prison
a few years.”***

The writer of Al Mizan, however, writes that such narrations are in contradiction to the Qur’an for the Qur’an considers Yusuf as one of the ‘sincere’ and true believers whom Satan has no influence over.

Moreover, in the next two verses, we see that the person who had forgotten about Yusuf was finally reminded, thus it becomes clear that the question of forgetfulness concerned the cup-bearer and not Yusuf.

Imam Sadiq (as) has been quoted to have said that Gabriel at the moment came up to Yusuf and said:

*Who is it that made **you** the most beautiful of all people?*

Yusuf answered:

My Lord.

Gabriel asked:

Who is it that made you the most favored among all your brothers with your father?

Yusuf answered:

My Lord.

Gabriel asked:

Who is it that sent the caravan of camels to rescue you from the bottom of the well?

Yusuf answered:

My Lord.

Gabriel:

Who is it that kept away the stone thrown at you?

Yusuf:

My Lord.

Gabriel:

Who is it that took you out from the well?

Yusuf:

My Lord.

Gabriel:

Who kept the lusts of those women which were targeted at you from reaching you?

Yusuf:

My Lord.

Gabriel:

*Your Lord puts this question to you: 'Then what caused you to take your problem to a creature and not to Me, the Creator? In order for the retribution of the word you said and for what you have done, you must remain in the prison for several more years.'*⁶

It is important, however, to note that in different kinds of circumstances, in order to repel the harms and avoiding some difficulties, it is permitted to take recourse to some mortals and it is not a vile.

On many occasions, this cannot be avoided, and sometimes it is even absolutely necessary, or it becomes compulsory.

Our Prophet (S) used to ask for assistance of the emigrants, and companions, as well as others in matters where he needed their help. If seeking assistance from other than Allah were not permissible and were a vile, he (S) would not have done it.

Thus if these narrations are correct, one must say that Yusuf's blameworthiness and the punishment imposed on him were due to the possibility that he might have abandoned that admirable habit he had which made him wait patiently for Allah's decree to manifest, and made him trust only in Allah, the Glorified, in all catastrophes and hardships.

This story teaches us to seek Allah's support and assistance when hardships and calamities befall us. We must seek to find shelter in Him alone, while at the same time it is permissible to seek the support of others in these circumstances knowing that it is because of His will others are there to help us.

Imam Sadiq (as) has been quoted to have said that Gabriel taught Yusuf the following supplication to recite after he finished each set of prayers for his freedom from prison:

"O Allah, provide me with the means of relief and deliverance and provide me with my sustenance from

where I know and where I do not know.”

And Shu‘ayb Aqarquti, quoting Imam Sadiq (as), says that when the period of Yusuf’s imprisonment came to an end and the day of his freedom had arrived, he placed his cheeks on the ground (in humility) and said:

“O Allah! if my sins have besmeared my honour when I face You, so I call upon You by the combined honour of my meritorious ancestors, ‘Ibrahim, Isma‘il, Is-haq, and Ya‘qub.”

After this prayer, Allah provided him with the means for his freedom. Shu‘ayb, the narrator of the tradition, asked the Imam if they could say the same prayer. The Imam replied:

You can also say something similar in this way; “O Allah, my sins have besmeared my honour when I face You, so I come to You and I call upon You by the combined honour of Your Prophet (S), Ali, Fatimah, Hassan, Hussayn, and the Imams (as)7.”

1. Tafsir Nur-uth- Thaqaalayn. Mizan ul Hikmah

2. Surah Yunus, No. 10, verse 34

3. Ibid, 35

4. Surah Al-‘An‘am, No. 6, verse 164

5. Surah An-Naml, No. 27, verse 59

6. Tafsir Abu Hamid Muhammad al Ghazali; Tafsir Majma‘-ul-Bayan, Tafsir Burhan, Tafsir Safi.

7. Tafsirs: Majma‘ ul Bayan, vol. 5, p. 235 and Safi, vol. 3, p. 23 and la

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