

# Joseph:

## A Tale of Two Traditions

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by Richard L. Diesslin

# *Joseph:* *A Tale of Two Traditions*

**Analysis (with cartoons) of the  
Joseph Story from the Bible and the Koran**

**An now, the rest of the story. Come and see Joseph  
from the eyes of two faith traditions: Judaism and Islam.  
The parallels are intriguing and the differences are  
informative. See why Joseph is important to both  
religions and why!**

**Richard L. Diesslin**

Joseph: A Tale of Two Traditions - EXCERPT

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# 1 Introduction

Perhaps one of the best opportunities to look at two faith traditions through the eyes of one common story is that of Joseph. The purpose of this analysis is to provide a general comparison between the Joseph story from the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Scriptures and the Koran (or Qur'ān). These stories were recorded several centuries apart and yet they are strikingly similar accounts. The Joseph Parallel section provides a study aid for examining the two texts side-by-side. The accounts are kept in their original order and divided by story element (pericope) to use in conjunction with this analysis for verse references and exact textual reference. In creating the parallel it became very clear that the overall plot and sequence of events are almost identical. But a direct textual comparison yields many significant differences. Similarities and differences reveal aspects of Judaism (and indirectly Christianity) and Islam that create opportunities for increased understanding of these faith traditions and dialogue. Some background on each source should assist in a basic understanding of their context.

The Biblical story of Joseph is found in Genesis chapters 37 through 50. It is the largest single story in Genesis and perhaps one of the highest in literary quality. It is a complex story but has a unified plot, a beginning, middle and ending and forms a very neat, satisfying whole. Joseph is not a Hebrew patriarch, but serves as vehicle to protect the line of Judah, the progenitor of Kings of Israel, and more directly the as the father to Ephraim and Manasseh, two Northern tribes of Israel. The story also links the early patriarch (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) to Egypt and the exodus event. Genesis may have been written as early as 950 B.C.E. (Yahwist tradition) and edited several times including 750 B.C.E. (Elohist tradition) and after 539 B.C.E. (Priestly tradition).

The Koranic story of Joseph is written in one, self-contained chapter (or sura). It is the longest story in the Koran concerning one person. It is considered one of the most beautiful stories in the Koran because it is the most detailed, full of human vicissitudes (something for everyone), and contains many themes. The Koran was written among other things to be read, recited and heard. Its style is somewhere between prose and poetry, such as in a highly spiritual sermon or allegory (e.g. God's plan unfolded in history). The Koran is a compilation of revelations given to the prophet Muhammad over a period of years and were first committed to memory by "professional

remembrancers.” These remembered revelations were written down on various media all within Muhammad’s lifetime (570 - 632 C.E.) and were then collected after his death and published, organized by the length of the text (longest first rather than in chronological order). Muhammad believed that the Koran confirmed, extended and completed information from former scriptures. While the Koran contains information on the Christian and Hebrew scriptures, most (that are related) come from the Hebrew scriptures, particularly the patriarchs. It has been speculated that the Joseph story would be particularly meaningful to Muhammad due to its correlation with his prophetic mission and that he would have become acquainted with many of the Hebrew scriptures indirectly through folk traditions from nearby Jewish communities (e.g. as close as Medina).

Because Islam traces its lineage to Abraham through Ishmael, (Ishmael instead of Isaac) the Koran has little use for Biblical tribal-political distinctions beyond Ishmael (they would have no added meaning to an Arabic audience) and thus the names are not important to the story. In fact, the only two names given in the Joseph sura are Jacob and Joseph. Koranic commentaries seem to attribute the Biblical names to the unnamed Koranic characters without need for qualification, which suggests that the accounts agree but that the names were indeed unimportant.

## **2 Beginnings**

*Genesis 37.1-2 / Koran 12.1-3*

The very first verses give a clue to the different emphasis of the two accounts. The Bible states that “This is the story of the family of Jacob”, while the Koran states that its purpose is to “... recount the best of histories, ...” and later in verse 12.7 states “... in the tale of Joseph and his brothers ...”, thus Joseph is central. The Biblical account is intended to be broader than just Joseph. In fact, it is very much concerned with the ethnic and tribal issues of Jacob’s offspring even though Joseph maintains the dominant role. The Koran is primarily concerned with using the Jewish patriarchs as role models of spirituality and morality (vs. heritage).” This initial clue will be played out throughout the texts.

## **3 Dreams of Greatness**

*Genesis 37.2b-11 / Koran 12.4-6*

In the Koran, Joseph relates his one dream of 11 stars, the sun and the moon bowing down before him only to Jacob. Jacob warns him not to tell his brothers because they may plot against him. Jacob seems to be aware of a larger role for Joseph and the animosity of the brothers, and he foretells that God will chosen Joseph to become an interpreter of visions. This is the first of many points that Jacob seems to have special knowledge that could only come from God. This is either a narrative tool to build suspense at how this will come about, or confirmation that Jacob is also considered a prophet in his own right, or both.

The Bible provides more insight into why the brothers might plot against Joseph. They were jealous. Jacob shows preference to Joseph, Joseph provides bad reports of his brothers, and he tells his two dreams to them. The first dream is of sheaves that bow down to his sheaf and the second is the same dream as in the Koran. It is likely that repetition of the brothers' hatred (Genesis 37.5, 8) surrounding the telling of the first dream is a narrative technique that emphasizes the hatred at least equally with the first dream. Jealousy motivates them to try to keep Joseph's dream from coming true. Interestingly, neither text has Joseph interpret his own dream(s), but the meaning is clear. We know that Jacob understands the dream in the Bible version, but not so completely (or willingly) as in the Koran. In fact in the biblical account, Jacob seems upset with Joseph, although he will keep the dream under consideration.'

Both texts are silent on the 12th and youngest brother Benjamin. It is assumed that he was still too young to accompany his brothers.

Figure 1 - I Know Something You Don't Know ...



#### 4 Sold by His Brothers

*Genesis 37.12-36 / Koran 12.7-20*

Both texts have a similar plot: the brothers sell Joseph into slavery. Joseph is with his brothers, they want to kill him, instead they cast him into pit, sell him to a caravan headed for Egypt, and use Joseph's shirt stained with false (or goat) blood as proof that he died. Beyond these main events the details are quite different.



In the Genesis account Jacob sends Joseph to check on his brothers, who weren't where they should have been (another bad report for Joseph to file), so when they see him coming they plot to kill him. Then it is likely that we see a blending of two Jewish stories, Reuben the protector and Judah the protector. The result is the same, Joseph is sold to a caravan headed to Egypt (Midianites in the Reuben tradition and Ishmaelites in the Judah tradition), but this is the first instance where some of the brothers are mentioned by name in the Biblical text. After Joseph is sold, the brothers put goat's blood on Joseph's shirt and take it to Jacob. Jacob, not the brothers, interprets the evidence and concludes that Joseph was "without a doubt" torn to pieces by wild animals. Then Jacob goes into extreme mourning over the death of the son of his favorite wife, Rachel (more so than when she died after giving birth to Benjamin, 35.20), and he can not be consoled. So the brothers' jealousy causes them to act out of haste and then they must now live with the consequence of their actions.

In the Koranic version, the brothers determine to kill Joseph and then convince Jacob to allow him to go with them. Not only is this pre-meditated, but it is much bolder on the part of the brothers. In both stories one pleads not to kill him, but in the Koran this is still before they have begun their journey. After receiving Jacob's permission, they immediately cast Joseph into a pit and then return to Jacob with Joseph's shirt soaked in "false" blood. The brothers (not Jacob) interpret what the bloody shirt means, but Jacob does not believe them. He is grieved, but it seems as though he is grieved at the brothers' cruelty because he does not know what actually has happened. He explicitly states that "Allah (God) alone can help me to bear the misfortune of which you speak." Thus Jacob continues to be more aware of the situation in the Koran than in the Bible. Joseph is sold after Jacob is told of Joseph's death, so they actually do have a chance to change their decision. Instead they watch for a chance to sell him to a traveling caravan (of unidentified origin - it is doubtful they would want to use Ishmaelites, their ancestors, as bad guys). Thus, the brothers do not act in haste, nor take an opportunity to change their minds, and, in addition, they show no remorse "They cared nothing for him." Some caution is advised in deciding whether the brothers were more evil than in the Biblical account: the Biblical account does not rule out that the brothers having thought of killing Joseph prior to this time (in fact we've already seen that they really hate him in the prior story element).

GENESIS

**Genesis Story of Joseph**  
Chapters 37-48

*Introduction*

**Chapter 37**

<sup>1</sup>Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. <sup>2</sup>This is the story of the family of Jacob.

*Joseph Dreams of Greatness*

Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. <sup>3</sup>Now Israel<sup>a</sup> (Jacob) loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. <sup>4</sup>But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

<sup>5</sup>Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. <sup>6</sup>He said to them, "Listen to this dream that I dreamed. <sup>7</sup>There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf." <sup>8</sup>His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?" So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words.

<sup>9</sup>He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, "Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." <sup>10</sup>But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, "What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?" <sup>11</sup>So his brothers

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a. Israel and Jacob are used interchangeably for Jacob. I have included the parentheses clarification throughout.

KORAN

**Koran Story of Joseph**  
Chapter 12

**In the name of Allah, the compassionate, the merciful.**

<sup>1</sup>Alif lam ra. These are the verses of the Glorious Book. <sup>2</sup>We have revealed the Koran in the Arabic tongue so that you may understand it.

*Introduction*

<sup>3</sup>In revealing this Koran We will recount to you the best of histories, though before We revealed it you were heedless of Our signs.

*Joseph Dreams of Greatness*

<sup>4</sup>Joseph said to his father: 'Father, I dreamt that eleven stars and the sun and the moon were prostrating themselves before me.'

<sup>5</sup>'My son,' he replied, 'say nothing of this dream to your brothers, lest they should plot evil against you: Satan is the sworn enemy of man. <sup>6</sup>You shall be chosen by your Lord. He will teach you to interpret visions and will perfect His favor to you and to the house of Jacob, as He perfected it to your forefathers Abraham and Isaac before you. Your Lord is wise and all-knowing.'

<sup>7</sup>Surely in the tale of Joseph and his brothers there are signs for doubting men.

GENESIS

were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

*Joseph Is Sold by His Brothers*

<sup>12</sup>Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. <sup>13</sup>And Israel (Jacob) said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am." <sup>14</sup>So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.

He came to Shechem, <sup>15</sup>and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" <sup>16</sup>"I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." <sup>17</sup>The man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. <sup>18</sup>They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him.

<sup>19</sup>They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. <sup>20</sup>Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of this dreamer." <sup>21</sup>But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." <sup>22</sup>Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him" --that he might rescue him out of the hand and restore him to his father. <sup>23</sup>So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; <sup>24</sup>and they took him and threw him into the pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

<sup>25</sup>Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. <sup>26</sup>Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? <sup>27</sup>Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers agreed. <sup>28</sup>When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to

KORAN

*Joseph Is Sold by His Brothers*

<sup>8</sup>They said to each other: 'Joseph and his brother are dearer to our father than ourselves, though we are many. Truly, our father is much mistaken. <sup>9</sup>Let us kill Joseph, or cast him away in some far-off land, so that we may have no rivals in our father's love, and after that be honorable men.'

<sup>10</sup>One of them said: 'Do not kill Joseph. If you must get rid of him, cast him into a dark pit. Some caravan will take him up.'

<sup>11</sup>They said to their father: 'Why do you not trust us with Joseph? Surely we are his friends. <sup>12</sup>Send him with us tomorrow, that he may play and enjoy himself. We will take good care of him.'

<sup>13</sup>He replied: 'It would grieve me to let him go with you; for I fear lest the wolf should eat him when you are off your guard.'

<sup>14</sup>They said: 'If the wolf could eat him despite our numbers, then we should surely be lost!'

<sup>15</sup>And when they took Joseph with them, they decided to cast him into a dark pit. We addressed him, saying: 'You shall tell them of all this when they will not know you.'

<sup>16</sup>At nightfall they returned weeping to their father. They said: 'We went racing and left Joseph with our goods. The wolf devoured him. But you will not believe us, though we speak the truth.'

<sup>17</sup>And they showed him their brother's shirt, stained with false blood.

<sup>18</sup>'No!' he cried. 'Your souls have tempted you to evil. But I will be patient: Allah alone can help me to bear the misfortune of which you speak.'

G E N E S I S

Egypt.

<sup>29</sup>When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes. <sup>30</sup>He returned to his brothers, and said, "The boy is gone, and I, where can I turn?" <sup>31</sup>Then they took Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. <sup>32</sup>They had the long robe with sleeves taken to their father, and they said, "This we have found; see now whether it is your son's robe or not." <sup>33</sup>He recognized it, and said, "It is my son's robe! A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces." <sup>34</sup>Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. <sup>35</sup>All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning." Thus his father bewailed him. <sup>36</sup>Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard.

*Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*

**Chapter 39<sup>a</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Now Joseph was taken down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an official of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. <sup>2</sup>The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man; he was in the house of his Egyptian master. <sup>3</sup>His master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hands. <sup>4</sup>So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him; he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. <sup>5</sup>From the time the he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and field. <sup>6</sup>So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge; and, with him there, he had no concern for anything but the food that he

a. The story of Judah and Tamar is not paralleled in the Koran, so it is not included here. It is significant in Judaism and Christianity, since it helps to establish the line of David through their son Perez.

K O R A N

<sup>19</sup>And a caravan passed by, who sent their waterman to the pit. And when he had let down his pail, he cried: 'Rejoice! A boy!'

They took Joseph and concealed him among their goods. But Allah knew what they did. <sup>20</sup>They (the brothers) sold him for a trifling price, for a few pieces of silver. They cared nothing for him.

*Joseph and the Egyptian Prince's Wife*

<sup>21</sup>The Egyptian who bought him said to his wife: 'Use him kindly. He may prove useful to us, or we may adopt him as our son.'

Thus We found in that land a home for Joseph, and taught him to interpret mysteries. Allah has power over all things, though most men many not know it. <sup>22</sup>And when he reached maturity We bestowed on him wisdom and knowledge. Thus We reward the righteous.

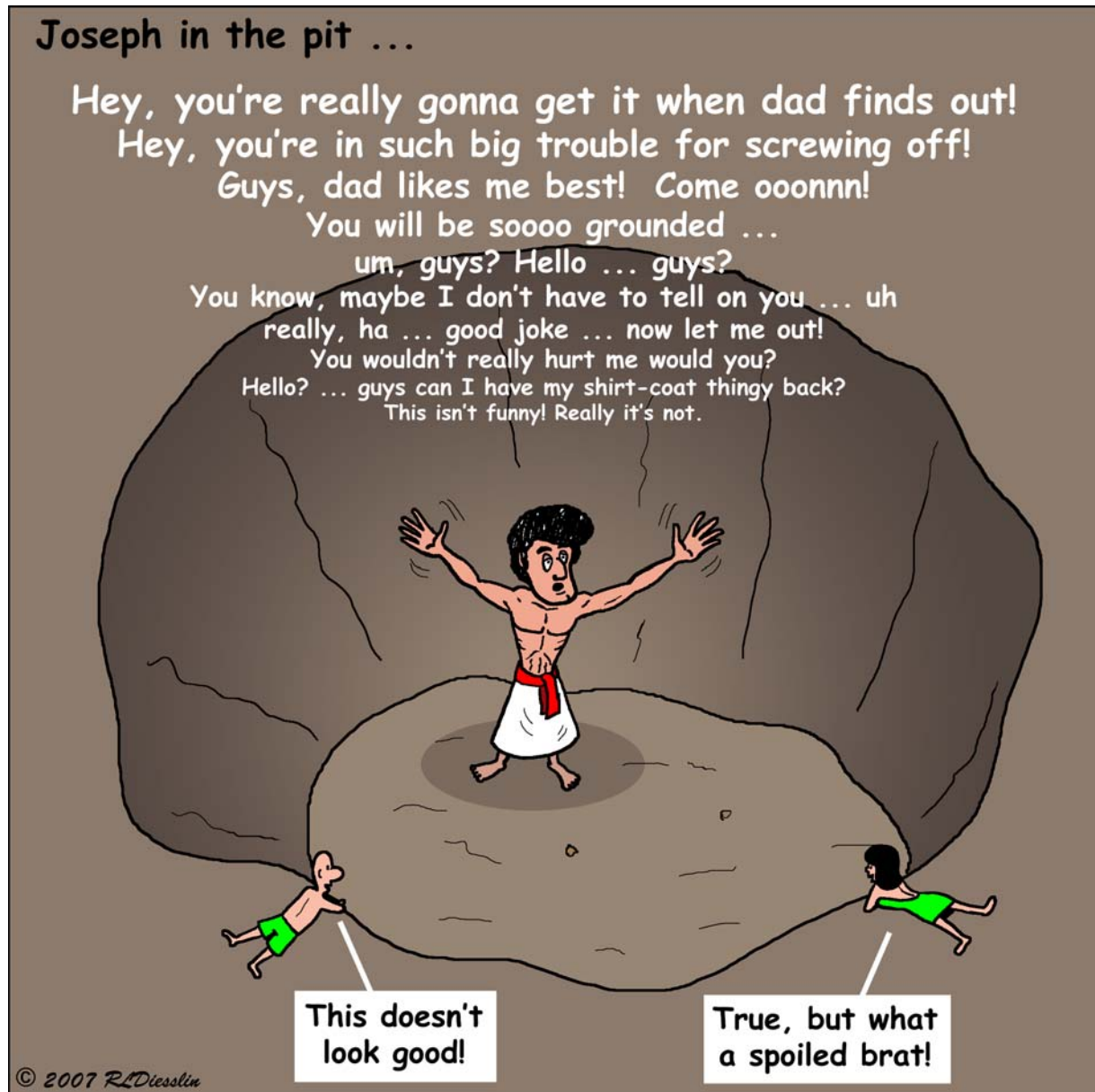
<sup>23</sup>His master's wife sought to seduce him. She bolted the doors and said: 'Come!'

'Allah forbid!' he replied. 'My lord has teated me with kindness. Wrongdoers never prosper.'

<sup>24</sup>She made for him, and he himself would have yielded to her had he not been shown a veritable sign by his Lord. Thus We warded off from him indecency and evil, for he was one of Our faithful ser-

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commentary and cartoons by Richard L. Diesslin



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