

Allah's Plan for Yusuf عليه السلام

When the caravan arrived, probably in the ancient city Memphis, Yusuf عليه السلام was sold for the paltry sum of 20 dirhams (small silver coins) to a nobleman, who took him into his service. The man who bought Yusuf عليه السلام was from the royal court and bore the title of Aziz (a title which was given to people of high rank such as governors). His name was Fitfir, or Potiphar.

The Aziz sensed immediately that there was something very special about this young man. Yusuf's handsome presence, his winning ways, his innocence, his intelligence and integrity, combined with his courtesy and noble manliness, greatly impressed the Aziz. A nobleman himself, the Aziz guessed that Yusuf عليه السلام must also be from a noble family. He, therefore, brought him home and instructed his wife to take good care of him, and asked her to treat him as an honored member of the household, adding that as they had no children, they might later on adopt him as a son.

Thus, according to Allah's plan, Yusuf عليه السلام was brought from a small village to the most advanced city of the age to be trained and to carry out some purposeful task.

Ancient silver coins



The Qur'an tells us that the Prophet Yusuf was sold into slavery for just a few silver coins.

Memphis

At the time of our story the ancient city of Memphis was the largest city in Egypt. It was founded in 3000 B.C., when Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt were united. This was the beginning of Egypt's dynasties.

Ancient Egyptians described their country as being shaped like a lotus plant: the Nile River was like the stem, the Faiyum oasis was like the bud, and the delta was like the flower. Though Egypt's boundaries are much wider, that land is so dry and barren that very few people can live there. Egypt's population has always been clustered along the life-giving Nile, the world's longest river, which flows all the way from Ethiopia.

Once a year the river overflowed its banks. This was terrible for the people, because their houses and lands would often disappear beneath the waters. Even worse, the river changed its course every year when the waters were reaching their highest level. But the floodwaters also carried all sorts of earth and sand from further south, and deposited it on the land. This living matter, called silt, is a natural fertilizer that makes crops flourish. It was this, along with the water itself, which for thousands of years made Egypt one of the richest lands in the region. As a result, the Egyptians developed a mighty empire with powerful kings, who were later known as Pharaohs.

Memphis was located at the head of the Nile delta, where the delta joined the valley. It was an excellent position from which to govern both lands, and Memphis remained the capital throughout the Old Kingdom. By the time Yusuf عليه السلام arrived in Memphis, some 1500 years later, the Old Kingdom had broken down, and there were a series of so-called intermediate dynasties, including several founded by invaders from the East, that ruled Egypt. In those days every king built himself a new palace and government buildings, so the size and shape of Memphis kept changing. But the major temples and the shipyards and harbor remained the same, and the city continued to flourish, and later had large foreign communities.

The city's name—in Egyptian, *Men-ofer*—means "established and beautiful." Indeed, it was. The city had grand buildings and temples dedicated to Egyptian gods. It had big markets and broad public squares. It was in one of these squares of this bustling city that Yusuf عليه السلام was auctioned as a slave.

Yusuf عليه السلام Faces Another Test

The years passed and Yusuf عليه السلام grew into a handsome and charming young man. With his change of fortune in Egypt, Yusuf عليه السلام grew in knowledge, judgment and power. The Aziz treated him with honor: Yusuf عليه السلام was more his guest and son than his slave. He quickly learned the language and had become almost like an Egyptian. He was truthful and honest, so people asked his advice and respected his opinions.

This attractive young man fascinated the Aziz's beautiful and powerful wife, whose name was Zulaykha. Yusuf عليه السلام kept his distance and never responded to her flirting, but Zulaykha would not take no for an answer. She followed Yusuf عليه السلام around; but still he would not listen to her. Then one day when the Aziz was away, his wife found Yusuf عليه السلام alone. She called him into her room and tried to seduce him. She bolted the doors and said: "Come!" The temptation was so strong that, if he had not been strengthened by his great faith in Allah, he would have fallen prey to mortal weakness.

Taken aback, Yusuf عليه السلام said, "God forbid. My master has treated me with kindness. I cannot betray his trust." Yusuf عليه السلام respected and loved the Aziz; he could not think of becoming involved with the Aziz's wife behind his back. Moreover, Yusuf عليه السلام knew that it would be a sin against Allah. So, as Zulaykha fluttered her eyelashes, Yusuf عليه السلام turned and ran toward the door. Zulaykha ran after him, caught hold of his shirt, and tore it. Yusuf عليه السلام managed to open

the door, only to find his master standing outside.

Zulaykha blurted out a wicked lie, in the way a guilty person often does, to explain herself to her husband and take revenge on the man who had spurned her. "What is the fitting punishment, my master, for one who has evil designs on your wife?" she cried. A moment before she had been showing her love for him, and now she began to accuse him falsely of misbehaving with her!

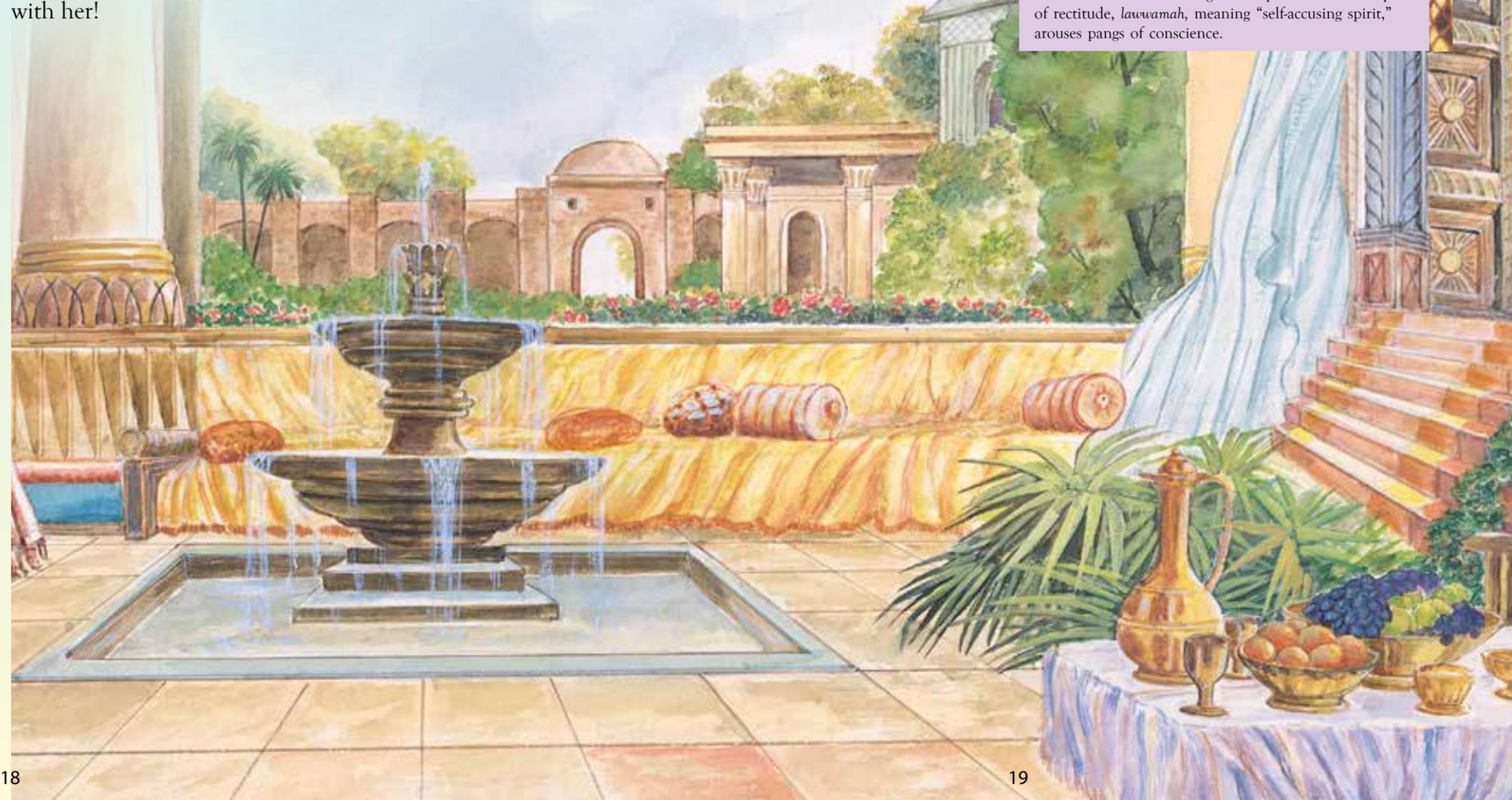
Yusuf عليه السلام denied her charges, and explained that it was she who had tried to entice him. By this time a number of family members had gathered to find out what the commotion was about. One, who had probably seen everything, suggested: "If Yusuf's shirt is torn from the front, she is speaking the truth. If it is torn from behind, then it is he who is to be believed." The Aziz looked at Yusuf's shirt and saw that it was torn from behind. He realized that his wife was at fault. "Your cunning is great indeed!" he exclaimed, and cautioned her to ask Yusuf's pardon.

The Gentle Voice of God

Yusuf عليه السلام kept intact his divine nature, which saved him at this delicate moment. Allah has given every single human being this divine nature right from his or her birth; it is also called your conscience. It helps you to judge between right and wrong and to tell the difference between good and evil. Your conscience cautions you when you are in danger of going astray.

When you ignore your conscience, you are ignoring the gentle voice of God. You will not only be deprived of God's help, but will slowly weaken your God-given inherently divine nature. On the other hand, one who is obedient to his creator will bow the moment God's call is heard. God's help gives such a person the strength to stand up against any evil.

The righteous never attribute any good to themselves, but attribute all good to the great source of goodness—the Almighty Allah. For this reason man's self is called *ammarah*, meaning "the soul went to command evil." At the slightest departure from the path of rectitude, *lawwamah*, meaning "self-accusing spirit," arouses pangs of conscience.



“Prison will be better...”

News of the incident spread throughout the town, and the womenfolk in particular began to gossip about it. They felt that Zulaykha was clearly in the wrong. The Aziz’s wife invited the noble ladies of the town to a banquet, where she planned to prove to them that they would also have acted as she had. Giving each of them a knife, she told them to cut some fruit; then she asked Yusuf عليه السلام to pass through the dining room. When Yusuf عليه السلام appeared, the ladies

were so struck by his extraordinary good looks that they exclaimed: “God preserve us! This is no mortal, but a gracious angel!” And in great excitement they cut their fingers with the knives in their hands.

The women may have been distracted by the attractive personality of Yusuf عليه السلام, but Yusuf عليه السلام, by contrast, had his entire attention focused on Allah. He was so absorbed in the greatness and sublimity of Allah that no other thing was able to attract him.

The Aziz’s wife did not change her attitude towards Yusuf عليه السلام. She even

threatened to send him to prison if he continued to reject her advances. Yusuf عليه السلام prayed in great anguish: “Help me, O my Lord; prison will be better than what I am being asked to do. If you do not turn their plot away from me, I will incline towards them, and then I will be one of the ignorant people.”

Even though the Aziz and the others knew that Yusuf عليه السلام was innocent, they decided, probably to protect Zulaykha, to imprison him. That was unjust, but it was also Allah’s answer to Yusuf’s prayer. And, indeed, prison opened up another chapter in the life of the Prophet Yusuf عليه السلام.

Banquet by the Aziz’s wife



The Aziz’s wife invited the noble ladies of the town to a banquet. Giving each of them a knife, she told them to cut some fruit; then she asked Yusuf عليه السلام to pass through the hall. When the ladies saw him, they were wonderstruck and in great excitement cut their fingers with the knives.

Interpreting Dreams

There were two prisoners who entered the prison at the same time as Yusuf عليه السلام. Both were servants in the royal court who had displeased the king. One of them was the king's cupbearer. His job was to serve wine to the king. The other was the king's baker. Both were charged with conspiring to poison the king. Both were impressed by the Prophet Yusuf's honesty and wisdom. They trusted him and began to consult him.

One night both of them had strange dreams. They came to Yusuf عليه السلام and narrated the dreams. One told him that he saw himself pressing grapes to make wine. The other said that in his dream he saw himself carrying some bread on his head that was pecked at by birds. They requested Yusuf عليه السلام, "to tell us their meaning, for we can see you are a man of virtue." Yusuf عليه السلام replied that they would learn everything before their next meal. He added that

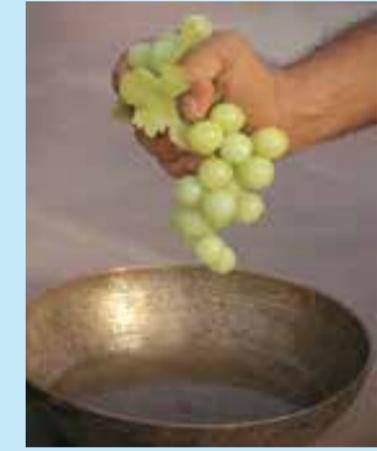
his Lord had given this knowledge of interpreting dreams to him.

After teaching them the faith, Yusuf عليه السلام interpreted the dreams. To the first, Yusuf عليه السلام said that he would shortly be released from the prison and would again pour wine for his master. To the other he said that he would be sentenced to death and birds would peck at his head. Not long after, the Prophet Yusuf's predictions came true. At his trial, the baker was charged with

conspiring to poison the king, found guilty, and condemned to death. The charges against the cupbearer were proved false; he was released and returned to the palace to his old job.

Yusuf عليه السلام had asked the cup bearer, to relate to the king his own case of cruel and unjust imprisonment. But the cupbearer completely forgot the request, and Yusuf عليه السلام languished in prison for some more years.

Pressing grapes



The cupbearer, one of the fellow prisoners of the Prophet Yusuf عليه السلام saw in his dream that he was pressing grapes. The dream was successfully interpreted by the Prophet Yusuf عليه السلام.



Birds pecking at their food.



The other prisoner saw in his dream that he was carrying bread on his head and birds were pecking at it. This dream was also interpreted by the Prophet Yusuf عليه السلام.

Ancient Egyptian Art

The ancient Egyptians, a highly cultured people who knew a great deal about life and death, were skilled in art and architecture. Ancient Egypt's pyramids are the oldest and largest stone structures in the world. The first pyramids were built about 4,500 years ago, and the largest, the Great Pyramid at Giza, which is one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, was built with more than 2 million limestone blocks, each weighing an average of 2.3 metric tons! Temples were also built of limestone. Parts of the temples were designed to resemble plants: for example, columns carved to look like palm trees or papyrus reeds.

The finest paintings and other works of art were produced for tombs and temples. Artists covered the walls of tombs with bright, imaginative scenes of daily life and pictorial guides to the afterlife. These paintings were done very seriously and beautifully, for the Egyptians believed the scenes could come to life in the next world. Temples were decorated with carvings showing festivals, military victories and other important events. Sculptors also carved large stone sphinxes, the statues that were supposed to represent Egyptian kinds or gods and were used to guard temples and tombs.

Craftsmen employed by the royal families and by the temples could make almost anything: carved figures and personal ornaments from wood, ivory, alabaster, bronze, gold and turquoise, harnesses and every sort of implement. A favorite subject for small sculptures was the cat, which the Egyptians considered sacred and valued for protecting their grain supplies from mice.

The Brothers Visit Egypt

Many countries on the shores of the Mediterranean looked to Egypt as a source of food. Caravans came from all directions—from Syria and Arabia and the coast of North Africa—all hoping to buy grain or barter for it. Yusuf عليه السلام had foreseen these countries' needs and had set aside enough foodstuffs for the purpose. But he restricted each trader to just one camel-load. That was as much as could fairly be given.

Back in the land of Canaan, Yaqub عليه السلام and his sons were hit by the famine too. Like everywhere else, food had become scarce in their land too. When he came to know that people were traveling to Egypt for grain, Yaqub عليه السلام asked his sons to go there to fetch some grain for the family, as there was hardly anything to eat. Only Binyamin did not accompany them, for Yaqub عليه السلام could not endure being separated from him. He was very anxious about him—the only real brother of Yusuf عليه السلام.

The ten brothers loaded their camels and began the slow journey to Egypt. After the long tiring trek, they finally arrived. Reaching the royal storehouse to buy grain, they presented themselves to the chief of the storehouses, the king of Egypt's minister. Although it had been about 20 years since he had seen them, Yusuf عليه السلام recognized his brothers immediately. They—not surprisingly—did not recognize him. How could they have ever imagined that the young boy they had thrown down a dry well could have survived, much less risen to such a high rank?

Science and Technology in Ancient Egypt

The Egyptians made scientific discoveries and technological inventions to develop their civilization. These discoveries and inventions ensured that thousands of years later we would be able to know many things about what life was like at that time.

Mathematics was developed in Egypt to help with the economy and engineering projects. Egyptians could measure area, volume, distance and weight, and used a system of counting by tens. Mathematics was used to solve problems such as how much grain was in a granary, or how many bricks would be necessary to build a ramp. The amazing pyramids are testimony to the accuracy of their methods!

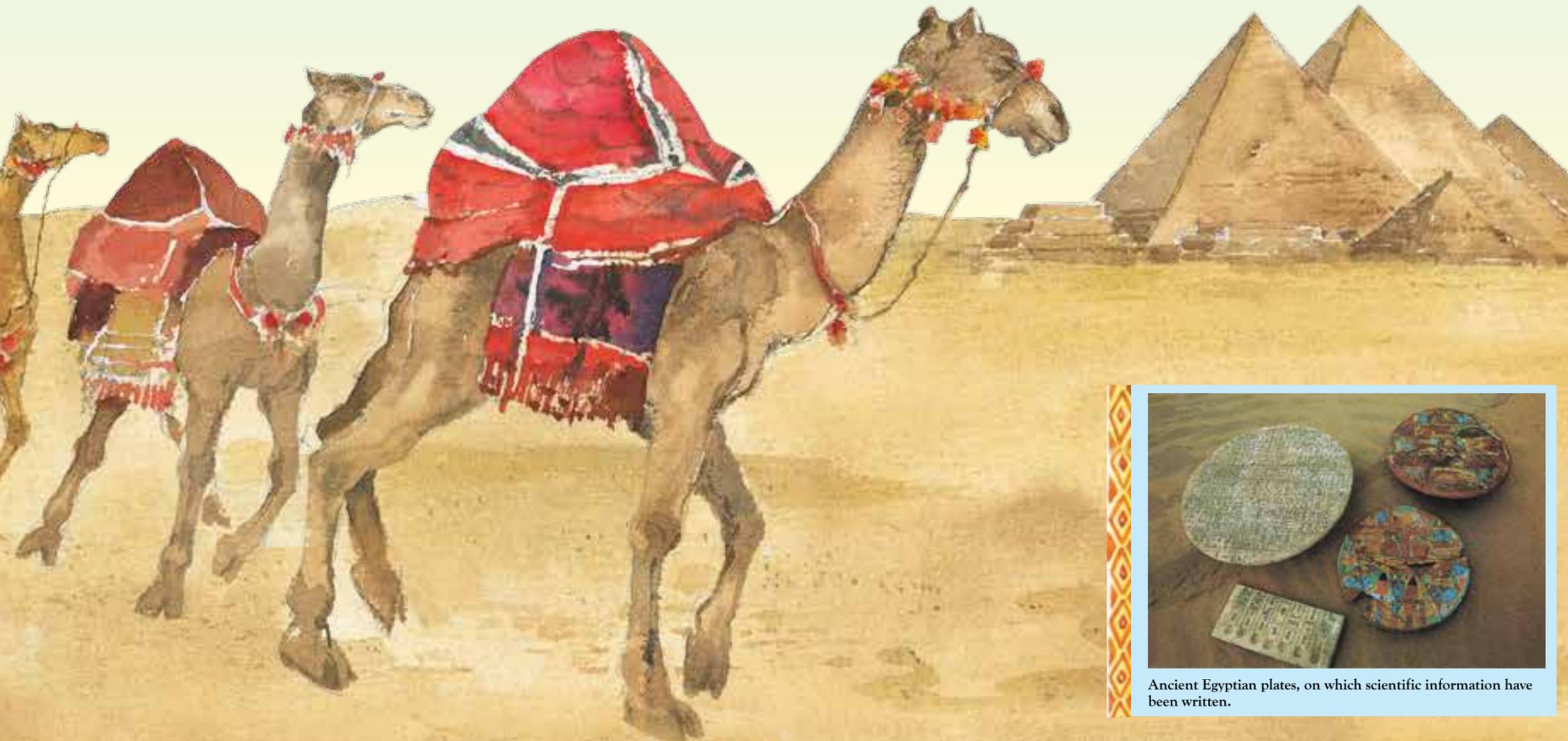
Medicine was also highly developed in ancient Egypt. Egyptian doctors studied the human body scientifically and could set broken bones, care for wounds and treat many illnesses. Some specialized in particular fields: defects of the eye was one, and stomach problems was another popular specialization.

A 365-day calendar was also devised using astronomical observations, to date events and keep track of religious festivals.

Even more important than development of the system of writing called hieroglyphics, the Egyptians produced the first kind of writing paper the world had ever seen: *papyrus*. The papyrus was a 10-15-foot-tall reed that grew wild in the vast marshes of the Nile Delta.

The Egyptians harvested this plant and figured out a way to turn it into lightweight but strong sheets, which were joined with flour paste to make long strips for long manuscripts, and could be rolled up as scrolls for storage.

The Egyptians used papyrus for all their record-keeping, including history and instructions for the souls of the dead that were kept in the tombs. Papyrus was exported all over the Middle East, with the result that other kingdoms and cultures were also able to keep records of their history.



Ancient Egyptian plates, on which scientific information have been written.

The King's Cup

While the grain for Binyamin was being weighed out, Yusuf عليه السلام put his drinking cup in his younger brother's packs. It was a gesture of great affection for his younger brother. Previously Yusuf عليه السلام had done something similar when he put back into his brothers' packs all the money they had brought to buy grain. The brothers only realized this when they

opened their packs once they were back home. This time too, no one knew of Yusuf's gift.

In the meantime, a measuring cup belonging to the king had been misplaced, and the courtiers suspected the brothers of stealing it. As the brothers passed through the streets of the city, a group of royal guards rushed up to them and shouted:

"Oh you people of the caravan! Indeed you are thieves!"

They turned back, and asked:

"What have you lost?"

"The king's measuring cup is missing," a guard

replied. "Whoever brings it back shall have a camel-load of corn."

"In God's name," they cried, "you know we did not come to do evil in this land. We are no thieves."

But the guards argued, "What punishment shall be his who stole it, if you prove to be lying?"

The brothers said that according to the Prophet Ibrahim's law, which they followed, the victim of the theft would be entitled to take the thief as a slave in compensation for the crime committed against him. The guards immediately agreed. When the packs were opened, there, glinting in the sun, nestled a precious cup – in Binyamin's bag! This was not the cup they were actually

looking for, but it was a similar one, a very expensive cup.

The brothers were terrified when the cup was discovered, but they showed no surprise, saying that Binyamin's brother Yusuf عليه السلام had also been a thief. Little did they realize that the king's minister they were addressing was none other than Yusuf عليه السلام! Yusuf عليه السلام showed restraint, saying only, "Your deed was worse. Allah best knows the things you speak of."

In this way the brothers themselves decided the punishment for the guilty party, and Binyamin was kept back by Yusuf عليه السلام. Under the king's law such a punishment was not possible. But this was not a trick on the part of the Prophet Yusuf عليه السلام to prevent his brother from leaving. In the words of the Qur'an, it was an inspiration, a plan from Allah: "Thus we planned (*kidna*) for Yusuf." (12:76).

A precious cup.



It was one such cup that was misplaced in the palace and it was mistakenly thought that Binyamin had stolen it.

A Providential Event

There are many different versions and interpretations of this episode. In some versions of the story of Yusuf عليه السلام, which also appears in the Bible, it is stated that Yusuf عليه السلام deliberately put the cup into Binyamin's bag to keep his brother with him in Egypt. Other versions simply say that "someone" put the cup in the bag, not necessarily Yusuf عليه السلام. Some interpreters say that it was the brothers who planted the cup in Binyamin's bag, to be rid of him as they had rid themselves of Yusuf عليه السلام before.

But in the Qur'an, two distinctly different words are used for the cups – clearly implying that Yusuf's

gift and what the king lost were two different things. The drinking cup belonging to Yusuf عليه السلام is called *siqaya* (12:70), while the king's measuring cup is called *suwa* (12:72). The cup that was recovered from Binyamin's bag was a *siqaya*, not a *suwa*.

But the confusion between the cups was enough, and the guards' need to apprehend someone was sufficiently urgent for Binyamin to be found guilty on the spot. Ironically, the brothers had set the punishment, as asked.

It was truly a series of providential acts for Yusuf عليه السلام.

“Never Give Up Hope!”

Now the brothers had a serious problem. How could they face their father, who had taken a solemn pledge from them to bring Binyamin back? They pleaded with Yusuf عليه السلام to free Binyamin: “Noble prince, this boy has an aged father. Take one of us, instead of him. We can see you are a generous man.” One of the brothers offered to remain there as a hostage in place of Binyamin. (According to a tradition, he was the same brother who had objected to killing Yusuf عليه السلام, suggesting that they cast him into a well instead.) But Yusuf عليه السلام turned down the request: “God forbid that we should take any but the man with whom our property was found: for then we should be unjust.”

The brothers were so upset they did not know what to do. The eldest brother refused to leave Egypt; he didn't have the courage to show his face to his father. He accused his brothers: “Do you not know that your father took from you a pledge in Allah's name, and that long ago you did your worst with Yusuf عليه السلام? I will not stir from this land until my father gives me leave or Allah makes known to me His judgment.” He asked his brothers to return to their father and tell him: “Father, your son has committed a theft. We testify only to what we know. How could we guard against the unforeseen? Inquire at the city where we lodged, and from the caravan with which we traveled. We speak the truth.”

When they reached home without Binyamin, the brothers told their ailing father that his son had committed a theft and that the king's minister had kept him as a punishment. The brothers swore to their father that this was the truth, and they even made the people of the caravan bear witness. Yaqub عليه السلام was absolutely stunned by the story. He knew his little Binyamin too well to believe that he had stolen anything. He flatly refused to believe them, thinking they had plotted to get rid of their youngest brother just as they had plotted against Yusuf عليه السلام. So he cried out, “No! Your souls have tempted you to evil. But I will have sweet patience (*sabr jamil*). Allah may bring them all to me... He alone is All-Knowing and Wise.”

The loss of Yusuf عليه السلام and now Binyamin was so hard for Yaqub عليه السلام to bear that he lost his eyesight weeping. Ruefully, he thought of how Yusuf's boyhood dreams had augured his greatness. For himself, the whole world had been plunged into

darkness. He poured out his distraction and grief only to Allah. His faith was still as strong as ever and he observed the discipline of patience—the greatest virtue of the faithful.

Turning away from his sons, Yaqub عليه السلام cried, “How great is my grief for Yusuf عليه السلام!” The sons retorted, “By God! You will never cease to remember Yusuf عليه السلام until you ruin your health or die.” But Yaqub عليه السلام forgave the sting and malice in the words of his sons and, like a prophet of Allah, he still wished them well, gave sound advice, and did not lose hope.

“O my sons! Go and enquire about Yusuf عليه السلام and his brother, and never give up hope of Allah's soothing mercy,” Yaqub عليه السلام said. “Truly, no one despairs of Allah's soothing mercy, except those who have no faith.”

The Breath of Yusuf عليه السلام

Before the brothers left for home, Yusuf عليه السلام gave his shirt to them and told them to touch his father's eyes with it to restore his sight, and to bring his parents to him. (Remember that the brothers had covered up their crime against Yusuf عليه السلام many years earlier by taking his shirt, putting false bloodstains on it, and pretending that he had been killed by a wolf.)

As they approached their land, Yaqub عليه السلام sensed that they were near, although they were still some distance from home, because he could smell the scent of Yusuf's shirt. No sooner had the caravan reached their town than the father said: "I feel the breath of

Yusuf عليه السلام, though you will not believe me." It was as if he felt the presence of Yusuf عليه السلام in the air. When a long-lost friend is about to be rediscovered, many people have a sort of foretaste of it, which they call telepathy. In the case of Yaqub عليه السلام it was more definite. But the people around Yaqub عليه السلام thought he had lost his mind. "In God's name," said those who heard him, "it is only your old illusion."

As soon as the brothers arrived back home, they gave their father the good news that Yusuf عليه السلام was alive and patted his face with the shirt. Yaqub عليه السلام at once regained his sight. He was overjoyed and, thanking Allah, said, "Did I not tell you, Allah has made known to me what you do not know?"

His sons sank their heads in shame and asked for forgiveness: "Father, beg for forgiveness for our sins. We have indeed done wrong." He replied, "I shall beg my Lord to forgive you. He is forgiving and merciful" (12:96-98). Yaqub عليه السلام did not ask for forgiveness for them at that very moment. He knew that there is a special time to do that – just before the dawn. That is a special time for remembrance of Allah and asking forgiveness. That is a time when Allah answers prayers.

The brothers told their father about Yusuf عليه السلام, who was now a powerful minister in the land of Egypt, next only to the king. They also told him about his invitation to them to bring their parents to settle in Egypt.

When all the household goods were packed, and other useful things like tools and weapons, rope and looms were added, they rolled up their tents and threw them over the backs of their camels. They herded their flocks together. Yaqub's family bade farewell to the land of Canaan, little knowing that their people would not return for hundreds of years, and moved off toward Egypt.

As they crossed the western expanses of the desert and approached the fertile delta of the Nile, they noticed many changes in the landscape. Finally, one of the brothers who had gone on ahead shouted, "The city! The city of Yusuf عليه السلام! Our journey is almost at an end!"

There is charity in forgiveness

Abu Abbas ibn Hibr relates that one day the Prophet exhorted people to donate something towards God's cause, and people gave according to their means. One of the Prophet's Companions, Ulbah ibn Zayd ibn Haritha, did not, however, have anything to give. He arose that night and, weeping before God, prayed to Him: "Lord I have nothing to give to charity. Instead Lord, I forgive whoever has brought me dishonour."

In the morning when the Companions had gathered, the Prophet asked them, "Where is the one who gave something to charity last night?" When no one arose, the Prophet repeated his question. Still no one answered. Then, when the Prophet had repeated his question for the third time, Ulbah ibn Zayd ibn Haritha arose. "Rejoice," said the Prophet, "for your gift to charity has been accepted." (*Al-bidayah wa Al-Mhayah*)