

Section 6: The King's Dream – Yusuf's Interpretation

Surah Yusuf – Verse 43

وَقَالَ الْمَلِكُ إِنِّي أَرَى سَبْعَ بَقَرَاتٍ سِمَانٍ يَأْكُلُهُنَّ سَبْعٌ عِجَافٌ وَسَبْعَ سُنبُلَاتٍ خُضْرٍ وَأُخَرَ يَابِسَاتٍ يَا أَيُّهَا الْمَلَأُ أَفْتُونِي فِي رُءْيَايَ إِن كُنْتُمْ لِلرُّءْيَا تَعْبُرُونَ

43. “And (once) the king (of Egypt) said: ‘Verily I saw (in a dream) seven fat cows which seven lean cows were eating; and seven green ears of corn and other (seven) dry. O’ chiefs (of my court)! Explain to me my dream, if you are able to interpret dreams.’”

This Surah talks about three dreams: namely Yusuf's dream itself, the dream of his two fellow prisoners, and the dream of the king of Egypt.

In the Torah it is cited that the king dreamed these two subjects on two different occasions; on one occasion the lean cows were eating the fat ones, and on another separate occasion, the green ears of corn were alongside the dry ears. 1

As for the speculation that the ‘Aziz of Egypt was the same person as the king of Egypt or that the two individuals were different, there are a number of differences in opinion which do not concern us here for the issues involved do not have any role to play in our discussion.

In Roudat-ul-Kafi dreams are said to consist of three kinds: The first type of dreams are those that give good tidings from the Divine, the second type are terrible dreams from the Satan, and the third type are those dreams that are meaningless and disorganized.

Yusuf had remained forgotten within the confines of the prison walls for a number of years, busy

perfecting himself and guiding the prisoners around him.

Life went on as usual until a seemingly minor matter changed not only his destiny but that of the entire people of Egypt and those of its around.

The king of Egypt, (called Walid-ibn-Rayyan), whose minister was the 'Aziz, had had an apparently confused dream. Next morning he summoned all the dream interpreters and his entourage and described the dream to them.

He said that he had a dream in which he saw seven lean cows attacked and devoured seven fat ones and seven green ears of corn with seven dry and withered ones spiraling around the former made them useless.

The verse says:

“And (once) the king (of Egypt) said: ‘Verily I saw (in a dream) seven fat cows which seven lean cows were eating; and seven green ears of corn and other (seven) dry...’”

He then turned to them and asked them for their opinion about this dream.

The verse says:

“...O’ chiefs (of my court)! Explain to me my dream, if you are able to interpret dreams’.”

Explanations

1. Allah (s.w.t.) saves a nation from famine by giving its oppressive and tyrannical king a dream on condition that its only interpreter be Yusuf.
2. The king of Egypt had had this astonishing dream several times.
3. The chiefs and the powerful people begin feeling threatened at the slightest unpleasant sign and clue lest their power might be lost and taken away from them.
4. To interpret dreams, one must turn to the right kind of people and one must not disclose it to anyone that is not properly qualified to interpret it.

(...if you are able to interpret dreams’.)

Surah Yusuf – Verse 44

قَالُوا أَضْغَاثُ أَحْلَامٍ وَمَا نَحْنُ بِتَأْوِيلِ الْأَحْلَامِ بِعَالَمِينَ

44. “They said: ‘confused medley of dreams (they are), and we do not know the interpretation of (such confused) dreams’.”

The Arabic term /’adqa/ is the plural form of /daq/ which means mixing; it also means a bundle of mixed sticks.

The Arabic word /ahlam/ is the plural form of /hulm/ which means a nightmarish dream, and /’adqau ’ahlam/ means dreams that are random, having no order and following no sequence so that an interpreter of dreams can not obtain any clues in order to interpret them.

The verse says:

“They said: ‘confused medley of dreams (they are), and we do not know the interpretation of (such confused) dreams’.”

Also, the ignorance of the official dream interpreters and their lack of knowledge was the cause for Yusuf’s release from prison, because at that time the cup-bearer of the king suddenly remembered Yusuf.

He approached the king and kneeled before him and said that in the course of being imprisoned with the cook, they saw dreams in the prison. They said their dreams to a man there, and he interpreted them. There happened actually what the man had said.

Now, he asked the king to let him go unto that man and bring the interpretation of the king’s dream to him.

Explanations

1. Do not try to justify your ignorance. When the dignitaries of the king’s court did not have any knowledge of interpreting dreams accurately, they said that the dream was confused and lacked coherence.
2. Tasks that require skill must be left to those who are capable. An expert would interpret a dream correctly whereas the non expert would claim that the same dream is confused and non interpretable.

Surah Yusuf – Verse 45

وَقَالَ الَّذِي نَجَا مِنْهُمَا وَادَّكَرَ بَعْدَ أُمَّةٍ أَنَا أُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِتَأْوِيلِهِ فَأَرْسِلُونِ

45. “And of the two (prisoners), he who had been released, remembered (Yusuf) after a time and said ‘I will inform you of its interpretation, so send me (to Yusuf)’.”

Although the word /'ummah/ means 'a community of people', in this context it refers to 'a number of days'.²

Good things reveal themselves sooner or later, and those who are knowledgeable must be introduced and eventually be called upon to solve problems in their field of experience.

Here, the cup-bearer of the king, who had gotten out of the prison, remembered the event of his dream in the prison interpreted by Yusuf.

The verse says:

“And of the two (prisoners), she who had been released, remembered (Yusuf) after a time and said ‘I will inform you of its interpretation, so send me (to Yusuf)’.”

This statement changed the status of the meeting. All the audience were gazing the cup-bearer. Then, finally, he was permitted to leave for it promptly.

Surah Yusuf – Verse 46

يُوسُفُ أَيُّهَا الصِّدِّيقُ أَفْتِنَا فِي سَبْعِ بَقَرَاتٍ سِمَانٍ يَأْكُلُهُنَّ سَبْعٌ عِجَافٌ وَسَبْعِ
سُنْبُلَاتٍ خُضْرٍ وَأُخَرَ يَابِسَاتٍ لَعَلِّي أَرْجِعُ إِلَى النَّاسِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَعْلَمُونَ

46. “Yusuf, O truthful one! Expound to us regarding (the dream of) seven fat cows which seven lean ones were devouring, and seven green ears of corn and other (seven) dry, that I may go back to the people, that they may know.”

The Arabic term /siddiq/ refers to someone whose words and deeds as well as his beliefs and behavior correspond to each other.

As his prison companion, the cup-bearer, had heard and seen Yusuf's words and deeds inside the prison, and he had himself actually experienced Yusuf's accuracy of interpretation regarding his own dream and that of his friend, this is why he addressed him with the epithet /siddiq/ or 'The Truthful One'.

Incidentally, the title /siddiq/ is one of the titles which the Prophet (S) accorded Hadrat Ali (as).³

And so the cup-bearer went to his old cellmate still inside the prison, the friend to whom he had been very untrustworthy to ask him about the interpretation of the dream that had been obsessing the king, with the full faith that the great Yusuf would forgive him and refrain from upbraiding him. The above verse says explains this meaning.

Surah Yusuf – Verse 47

قَالَ تَزْرَعُونَ سَبْعَ سِنِينَ دَأْبًا فَمَا حَصَدْتُمْ فَذَرُوهُ فِي سُنْبُلِهِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا مِمَّا تَأْكُلُونَ

47. “He said: ‘You shall sow for seven consecutive years and that which you have harvested you leave it in its ear, except a little whereof you eat’.”

Instead of criticizing his friend in prison for forgetting and neglecting him, and without setting any pre conditions for interpreting the king’s dream, Yusuf immediately interpreted the dream, for when society is in times of crisis and need, it is not meritorious to withhold knowledge especially in regard to that knowledge which can alleviate the crisis.

Thus he said to his friend, that the people should cultivate in earnest for seven consecutive years, but put whatever they reap in storage, except for the small amount necessary for their personal needs. The verse says:

“He said: ‘You shall sow for seven consecutive years and that which you have harvested you leave it in its ear, except a little whereof you eat’.”

In a clear and thorough manner he outlined the strategy of preparing for the coming drought with a defined program of food rationing and stockpiling surplus production, showing that not only was he well versed in the science of dream interpretation, but that he was an authority in economic planning and administration as well.

Explanations

1. The men of Allah must always think of the people’s welfare and have designs both in the long and short terms.
2. If grain is stored while it is still inside their husks, it naturally lasts longer. Therefore, at a time when there were no modern facilities for efficient grain storage, stockpiling had to take into consideration the options available and exploit them efficiently.
3. Getting prepared for all kinds of disasters such as famines, earthquakes, and floods through planning and taking appropriate measures for the future are not incompatible with trusting in Allah and submission to Allah’s decree.
4. Not everything bitter is bad. This very famine resulted in Yusuf’s rise in the government and encouraged the people to work hard. The stockpile which they made at that time led to a great degree of self sufficiency. Indulgence today leads to scarcity tomorrow.

5. Keeping an eye upon the future and long term planning are absolutely necessary for the administration of any country; and so is government control over production and distribution under situations of economic crisis.

6. The dreams of unbelievers can also prove to reflect hidden realities and can contain some instructions for the preservation of a society.

Surah Yusuf – Verses 48 – 49

ثُمَّ يَأْتِي مِنْ بَعْدِ ذَلِكَ سَبْعٌ شِدَادٌ يَأْكُلْنَ مَا قَدَّمْتُمْ لَهُنَّ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا مِمَّا تَحْصِنُونَ

ثُمَّ يَأْتِي مِنْ بَعْدِ ذَلِكَ عَامٌ فِيهِ يُغَاثُ النَّاسُ وَفِيهِ يَعْصِرُونَ

48. “Then after that seven years of hardship will come that (people) will consume what you have before hand laid up for them, except a little of what you will have preserved.”

49. “Then there will come after that a year in which the people will have rain, and in it they will press (wine and oil).”

The Arabic phrase /yuqa-un-nas/ is either derived from /qau/ ‘to help’ in which case the verse could mean that Allah would help the people and the difficulties which they had over the past fourteen years will be over; or it could be derived from /qay/ which means to rain and thus the period of hardship would be brought to an end.⁴

Yusuf had indicated that the seven lean cows and the seven fat cows, the seven green ears and seven withered ears symbolized fourteen years of prosperity and famine.

The verse says:

“Then after that seven years of hardship will come that (people) will consume what you have before hand laid up for them, except a little of what you will have preserved.”

He also predicted that the fifteenth year would be a year of abundant rain and affluence.

The verse says:

“Then there will come after that a year in which the people will have rain, and in it they will press (wine and oil).”

However, this was not simply dreamt by the king, this indicates that Yusuf included more news from the invisible in order to pave the way for the acceptance of his prophethood.

The interpretation which Yusuf had put forth for the dream was very precise and exact. Indeed, it indicates that he was no ordinary dream interpreter; in fact he was a leader inside a prison who was able to forge a countrywide program for the entire kingdom for the next fifteen years.

The interpretation and the plans proposed created the bases both for relieving the people of Egypt from the devastation of the famine and Yusuf's freedom from the confinement of prison. In the end, it resulted in changing a government of despots.

The conditions for an efficient administrative system in any given society are:

- 1–People's confidence,
- 2–Sincerity,
- 3–Wisdom and knowledge,
- 4–Correct prediction and forecasting, and
- 5–People's obedience.

Thus, the people of Egypt were saved from their plight because they obeyed Yusuf.

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1. Tafsir Al-Mizan, and Nur-uth-Thaqalayn
 2. Tafsir-ul-Kabir, and Al-Mizan
 3. Tafsir Atyab ul-Bayan and Tefsir ul-Kabir.
 4. Tafsir Al-Mizan.

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