

Seven Doors to Islam

*Spirituality and the Religious Life
of Muslims*

JOHN RENARD

University of California Press
BERKELEY LOS ANGELES LONDON

Reprise: Joseph of the Seven Doors

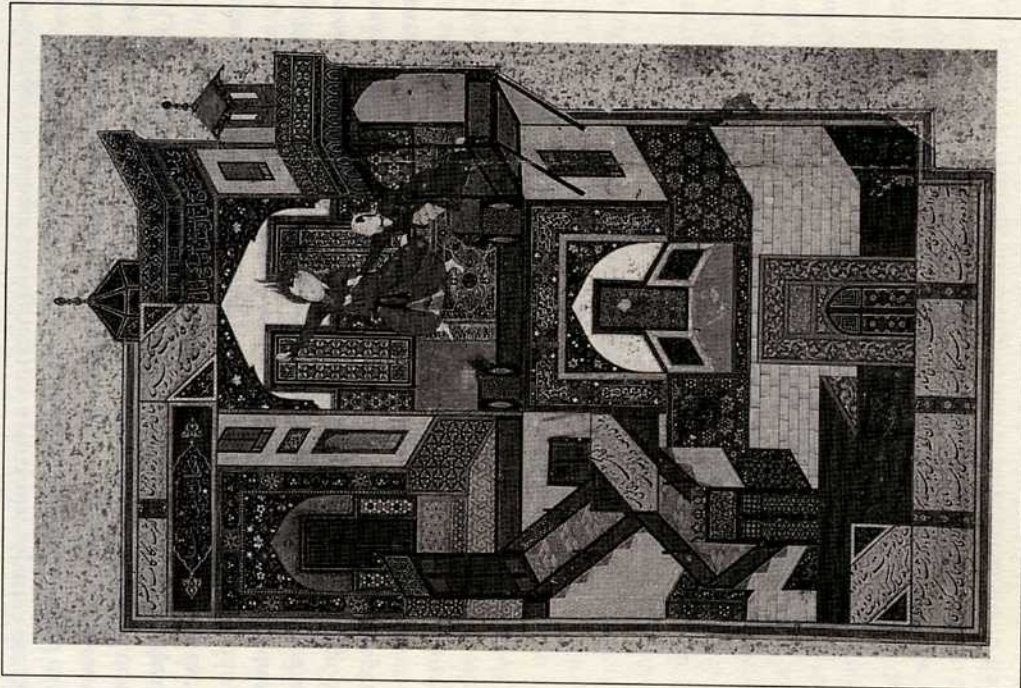
Few characters have captured the imagination and hearts of generations of Muslims across the world as the prophet Joseph has. The Islamic tradition's long love affair with this prophet has made Joseph a unique paradigm of the spiritual life. Joseph provides the most comprehensive reminder of the various aspects of that tradition. Joseph's story in the Qur'an begins and leads the way on a return journey through the seven doors.

JOSEPH IN THE QUR'AN

What the Qur'an calls "the most beautiful of stories" has also been one of the most popular in Islamic life and thought. It has been the inspiration for some lovely mystical and didactic poetry, especially in Persian, which has in turn provided occasion for a number of dazzling illustrated manuscripts. The Qur'anic account of the prophet Joseph in Sura 12 offers an excellent opportunity to enter into a unified dramatic narrative, as well as to appreciate one aspect of the Islamic scripture's relationship to Jewish and Christian traditions. Unlike many other prophets, Joseph appears virtually nowhere else in the Qur'an. Despite his popularity, Joseph is only mentioned in a handful of hadiths.

In the story Joseph dreams that the sun and moon and eleven stars bow before him. His father, Jacob, warns him not to reveal this dream to his half brothers lest they envy him. Meanwhile the brothers are already convinced that their father prefers Joseph over any of them, and they plot to do away with Joseph. They throw him into a well and sell him to some traders who are on their way to Egypt. The brothers take his bloodstained shirt back to

Figure 38. (Opposite) Bihzad's painting of Yusuf fleeing through the seven locked doors of Zulaykha's palace, Timurid Persia (1488). The text throughout the work's various panels is *Bustan*, by Sa'idi. Courtesy of Egyptian National Library, Adab Farsi 908, folio 52b. Photograph by Peter Brenner, reproduced by permission of Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



Jacob to prove that a wolf has devoured Joseph. (The shirt is not a source of jealousy in the Qur'an as it is in the Bible.) Upon seeing the shirt, Jacob weeps himself blind with grief. The merchants then sell the slave to an Egyptian bureaucrat who bears the title 'Aziz (the lofty one), whose wife seeks to seduce the handsome youth. Discovering that his wife was the aggressor, the official tells her to ask Joseph's forgiveness. When the women of Egypt criticize the behavior of 'Aziz's wife, she throws a party for them; just as they are about to peel their dessert oranges, she brings Joseph into the hall. The women are so distracted by his beauty that they cut their hands, now persuaded that the seductress can hardly be blamed for her actions.

'Aziz's wife, whom later tradition identifies as Zulaykha, nevertheless contrives to have Joseph imprisoned, and the prophet decides prison would be a relief. Joseph's two cellmates tell him their dreams, and he interprets them. One is later released to work for the pharaoh. When the monarch reports a dream that none of his own courtiers can explain, the former prisoner seeks Joseph's help. When 'Aziz's wife finally admits in the presence of the king that she, not Joseph, had been the aggressor, the ruler releases Joseph and elevates him to a position of authority.

During a time of famine in their country of Canaan, Joseph's brothers come to Egypt to buy grain. Joseph decides to keep his identity secret until they have brought their youngest sibling, Benjamin. Then Joseph delays the revelation further and contrives to detain young Benjamin by having his assistants slip a royal goblet into Benjamin's bag. When Joseph's guards discover the cup, the other brothers add insult to injury by protesting that this is no surprise, for they once had another brother (Joseph) who was also a thief. One brother remains behind with Benjamin while the others return to explain the situation to their father. The grief-stricken Jacob sends them back to Egypt to inquire after Joseph and Benjamin until they know the truth.

The brothers return and ask Joseph, whose identity is still hidden, to show kindness and leniency. Then Joseph asks what only he could have asked, for no one else in Egypt knows the story of their violent act: were they not aware of what they had done to Joseph? He then forgives them all. At that the brothers realize Joseph's true greatness, for he has not only been favored by God but has also forgiven them in spite of their treachery. Joseph then sends them back home to cast his shirt over Jacob's face, so that he might recover the sight his grief has cost him. Joseph's scent heals Jacob's eyes, and the whole family returns to Egypt. They acknowledge Joseph's high estate (thus fulfilling his dream of the heavenly lights bowing before him), and he receives them gladly. Joseph's prayer sums up the story: "My Lord,

you have granted me a share in authority and have schooled me in the interpretation of events/dreams. . . . Let me die as one who surrenders [to you (literally, "as a muslim")] and set me among the righteous" (Q 12:101).¹

There are several ways to discuss the Qur'an's version of the Joseph story. One contemporary Muslim interpretation of the Qur'an observes that it is "less a narrative than a highly spiritual sermon or allegory explaining the seeming contradictions in life, the enduring nature of virtue in a world full of flux and change, and the marvelous working of God's eternal purpose in His Plan as unfolded to us on the wide canvas of history";² and some of Islam's greatest poets have read the story similarly. Non-Muslim readers may be tempted to interpret the story primarily as a retelling of the biblical account in Genesis 37-46. Comparative study can indeed shed important light on both traditions, but ceding authority or definitive form to the earlier tradition may diminish the value of the later. The two accounts arise out of very different circumstances, differ in tone, and communicate different messages; each must be read on its own terms.

As a number of recent studies of Sura 12 demonstrate, the Qur'anic tradition demands a unique interpretation. One way is to read the story with an eye to plot, theme, and character. According to Mustansir Mir, the plot turns on three axes. First, the story builds tensions during its first half (Q 12:1-44), then resolves them in reverse order in the second half (Q 12:45-100). The king's dream-dilemma is interpreted, Joseph is released from prison, Joseph is exonerated before the Egyptian women and 'Aziz's wife, Joseph's brothers are repaid for their conniving, and Joseph's dream is fulfilled. Second, the sura parallels certain events, sometimes antithetically. For example Joseph in the well is paired with his imprisonment in Egypt; and the brothers' attempts to capture their father's love parallels 'Aziz's wife's attempt to win Joseph's love. Third, dramatic elements—such as the dream, Joseph's secrecy, and the foreshadowing of one event by another—heighten the story's effect.

In Sura 12 the treatment of the image of God emphasizes God's attributes of transcendence and sovereignty, graciousness and subtlety, and omniscience and wisdom, all to demonstrate the inevitability of the divine design. Within that larger theme several subordinate themes emerge: Joseph's embodiment of the chief qualities of a prophet, namely, knowledge, trust, and uprightness; a balance between God's initiative and human responsibility; and the pattern of trial, recompense, and repentance. As for the function of character, the Qur'anic story emphasizes both the positive moral model of laudable figures such as Jacob and Joseph, and the virtues they exemplify (patience, trust, shrewdness, and veracity); and the negative model

of reprehensible characters such as the brothers and 'Aziz's wife, who exemplify the qualities of recklessness, mendacity, and lustful exploitation.³

JOSEPH AND ISLAMIC DEVOTION

Although Joseph has never been precisely an object of devotion in Islam, he does figure prominently in the literature and lore associated with a theme of great importance in Shi'i devotional tradition: the redemptive suffering of prophets and Friends of God. All God's prophets suffer at the hands of unbelieving people, and their endurance is a mark of their friendship with God. Joseph's story is especially poignant in that the opposition comes from his own family; and patience in adversity is Joseph's special virtue.

In the *ta'ziya* plays commemorating the martyrdom of Husayn, the tribulations of Joseph and his father, Jacob, become a touchstone of redemptive suffering for Shi'i Muslims. The scenes that depict the story of Joseph generally embellish the Qur'anic account. They heighten the emotional effect by emphasizing the torment that the prophet and his father suffered. Jacob reflects on the trauma of seeing the bloodstained coat of his son. As he looks into the future, Jacob wonders how much greater will be the pain of the mother of Husayn when she sees the shirt of her son who has been so brutally slain. Jacob prays that a thousand like himself and Joseph might be Husayn's ransom and then asks Gabriel to show him the scene at Karbala still so many centuries in the future.

A surprising twist toward the end of this tale of redemptive suffering again features Jacob and Joseph. In the final scene of the *ta'ziya*, Jacob and Joseph are the first to appear after the trumpet of resurrection sounds. But both Jacob and Joseph have by now forgotten their ancient care for each other; each now pleads only for his own salvation. Their story becomes a foil to underscore both the torment suffered by the family of Muhammad and their unflinching altruism. Even prophets like Jacob and Joseph can experience a falling out, but the Prophet's family remain in harmony. Husayn recalls that though Jacob lost his son Joseph, Joseph was eventually found; Husayn, on the other hand, lost his beloved son 'Ali Akbar for good. When Jacob rehearses his grief at how Joseph, the most beautiful of creatures, was thrown into the well, Husayn retorts that 'Ali Akbar was far more handsome than Joseph. Jacob was indeed fortunate to have lost his sight from grief, for Husayn's good eyes were forced to watch his son's slaughter. Never did Joseph suffer as Husayn did, and in any case Jacob only heard the story from others. In short, Joseph and his father function here as the standard

against which all beauty, grief, and redemptive suffering are to be judged—until the story of Muhammad's family raises that standard.⁴

JOSEPH AS MODEL OF VIRTUE AND WISDOM FIGURE

Joseph's qualities and values made him a model even for Muhammad. Most obvious, Joseph had a gift for dream interpretation that initially prompted Pharaoh to place the young man in a position of leadership, and he showed a strong administrative capability in the high office to which Pharaoh had assigned him. But more significant in this context is Joseph's capacity for forgiveness. In his Sufi manual, *The Book of Light Flashes*, Sarraj describes the personal qualities Muhammad exhibited when he returned to conquer Mecca. Even though the Meccans had plotted against the Prophet, heaped injury on him and punished his family and Companions to the point of driving them away, Muhammad rose to address the Meccans with a message of forgiveness on the day of conquest. According to Sarraj, the Prophet praised and glorified God and said, "I speak to you as did my brother Joseph, peace be upon him, 'You bear no reproach this day, for God has forgiven you.'" This close paraphrase of Qur'an 12:92 recalls how Joseph received, and was reconciled with, his once treacherous brothers.⁵

Since even Muhammad emulated Joseph, ordinary leaders have greater cause to do so. Nizam al-Mulk's mirror for princes, *Treatise on Government*, tells a story of Joseph in its chapter "On recognizing the extent of God's grace towards kings":

Tradition tells that when Joseph the prophet . . . went out from this world, they were carrying him to Abraham's tomb . . . to bury him near his forefathers, when Gabriel . . . came and said, "Stop where you are; this is not his place; for at the resurrection he will have to answer for the sovereignty which he has exercised." Now if the case of Joseph the prophet was such, consider what the position of others will be.⁶

Tradition has it that Joseph "was detained for five hundred years at the gates of paradise and not admitted so that the pollution of worldly kingship might be fully removed from him."⁷

Joseph models forgiveness for everyone. In a discourse, Sharaf ad-Din Maneri discusses the meaning of sin and forgiveness in the context of the Joseph story. When Joseph first reveals his identity to his brothers, they fear wrathful vengeance for their perfidy. But Joseph instead forgives them unconditionally after the model of God's infinite mercy, refusing even to mention their injustice to Jacob at their eventual reunion. Joseph sees in that re-

union the final meaning of his dream; he has refused to dwell on the evil he had suffered, preferring to recall only the good.⁸

Joseph is also an exemplar for young Muslim men, especially in his virtue of chastity, which can only be built on complete trust in God. In one of his discourses 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani asks his listeners when they will begin to appreciate that only the jealousy of God can keep them chaste. He explains that it was the divine jealousy that prompted Joseph to leave Zulaykha's presence. He quotes Qur'an 12:24, "So it was, that We might ward off from him evil and lewdness; he was one of Our devoted servants," and then explains further that his listeners must emulate the virtue of Joseph in this respect. God gave Joseph the virtue during his confinement in the well and in prison, where he learned total reliance on God's sustenance.⁹

Far from the Middle East this prophet's example remains equally potent. In Southeast Asia the story of Joseph survives in an indigenized adaptation, a poem called *The Story of Joseph (Serat Yusuf)*. This "most representative pre-modern poem of rural East Java" is still performed ritually on special occasions. In Java, Joseph also became a model for village youth through his exemplary heroism, faith, prophetic power, chastity, and familial devotion. Here Joseph's multifaceted character represents a model of virtue for every situation in which an exemplar is needed.¹⁰

Joseph also holds an important place as the embodiment of wisdom. Sharaf ad-Din Maneri includes in his *Table Laden with Good Things* a discourse devoted almost entirely to Joseph as wisdom figure. He reflects on the sagacity of Joseph's instructions to his brothers that they "fling" his shirt over Jacob's face, rather than merely "take it to him"; for Jacob's joy at hearing news of his lost son would have naturally overwhelmed the old man and would have made him forget to rub the tunic on his eyes. In addition, since it was the shirt that caused his father's blindness in the first place, Joseph knows that only the shirt can restore sight. Post-Qur'anic tradition holds the shirt as a prime symbol of Joseph's relationship to Jacob. Maneri further interprets this aspect of the story as an indication of mystical love. The scent of Joseph reaches his father but not the rest of the family, because Jacob is a true lover passionately seeking the beloved. The others do not attend to that fragrance, for they do not appreciate the consummate value of its source as their father does. After all, the brothers do not recognize Joseph even when he stands before them. Normally it is appropriate that a son come to his father, not vice-versa; but because Jacob is a lover and Joseph the beloved, Maneri finds it not at all strange that Joseph instructs his brothers to bring his father to him in Egypt. Besides, Maneri continues, even from

the juristic perspective, it would not be fitting for Joseph to leave his position of authority, and risk disorder in his absence.¹¹

JOSEPH AS THE BEAUTY OF GOD

According to an ancient saying, "God created goodness and beauty in ten parts; he gave nine parts to Joseph . . . and one part to the rest of the world."¹² On a popular level, Joseph's beauty has naturally been associated with physical attractiveness. Local folk tradition in some Muslim communities still recommends the use of spells to tap into the spiritual power of Joseph's comeliness. On the Indonesian island of Sumatra, for example, the Gayo people use spells that feature Joseph when they wish to enhance their general attractiveness to members of the opposite sex. One popular invocation requests that "[j]ust as Sitti Zulaika [Potiphar's ('Aziz's) wife] was attracted to the prophet Yusuf, so let [insert name] be attracted to me."¹³ But classical tradition has also found much deeper meanings in Joseph's beauty. Joseph is both the image of God's irresistible splendor understood as the goal of the soul's journey, and the symbol of that for which all artists strive in their creative endeavors.

Joseph's beauty has inspired numerous imaginative works of literature. Some reflect on the scriptural text of Sura 12 and then develop a meditative tale to explain it, much the way medieval rabbis elaborated their Midrashic commentaries on the Hebrew scriptures. Yahya Suhrawardi Maqatl's charming recital "On the Reality of Love, or The Solace of Lovers" is a fine example of such a meditative tale. It describes how three brothers—Beauty, Love, and Sorrow—are born of the pearl of God's first creature, Intellect. Kingly Beauty, the eldest of the three, waits long for a person on whom he might bestow his sovereignty. On hearing of the birth of Joseph, Beauty races to him, with the brothers in pursuit. Beauty becomes so united with Joseph that when the heavenly brothers Love and Sorrow catch up with their older sibling, they can see no difference between Beauty and Joseph. Beauty has no further interest in Love and Sorrow, and the two depart as if exiled. They decide that they will journey in different directions in quest of self-discipline, seeking out guidance from the seven sages of this created world.

Love heads for Egypt; Sorrow, for Canaan. Sorrow becomes inseparable from Joseph's father, Jacob, so that the old man surrenders his sight to Sorrow at the loss of Joseph. Meanwhile Love, in search of the perfect person, finds his way to Zulaykha's apartment. She is immediately smitten and asks Love to tell her his story. Love explains how he and his brothers were sep-

ated, and how Zulaykha built a house for him, in which she had hoped she might persuade him to stay. There Love remained as her only prize—until word arrived that Joseph had come to Egypt. Seeing Joseph, Zulaykha was beside herself with longing and gave up everything to be with him.

Meanwhile Jacob in Canaan hears that his son has appeared in Egypt, so he and Sorrow travel there with his other sons. "When Sorrow saw Love he knelt in servitude to Beauty and placed his face on the ground. Jacob and his sons did as Sorrow had done and all placed their faces to the ground. Joseph turned to Jacob and said, 'Father, this is the interpretation of my vision I related to you: I saw in my dream eleven stars, and the sun and the moon; I saw them make obeisance unto me' (Q 12:4).¹⁴ Suhrawardī's allegory belongs to the genre of visionary recital (*hikayat*), for it depicts Joseph as a symbolic type of the mystical seeker.

Perhaps the most famous literary creation that praises and meditates on Joseph as divine beauty is the fifteenth-century Persian poet Jami's didactic epic *Joseph and Zulaykha*. Tradition has thoroughly exonerated Zulaykha of guilt in her attempted seduction of Joseph, and she has come to be regarded as the epitome of the lover beside herself at the sight—even the mere thought—of the beloved. The transformation had occurred long before the eleventh-century writer Abu 'l-Qasim al-Qushayri chose to describe Zulaykha as a prime example of preferring another to oneself—a prime characteristic of true love.¹⁵ Jami took that sympathetic view of Zulaykha and fashioned around it a romance. In his preface, the poet writes, "Never was there a beloved to compare with Yusuf, whose beauty exceeded that of all others; when we wish to describe an exceptionally handsome youth, we call him 'a second Yusuf.' Among lovers none was ever the equal of Zulaykha, whose ardent passion was quite unique. She loved from childhood to old age, both in omnipotence and in destitution. She never ceased to devote herself to love: she was born, she lived, and she died—in love."¹⁶

In one of Jami's most enchanting scenes, Zulaykha schemes to have Joseph to herself. Acting on the suggestion of a handmaiden, Zulaykha enlists the services of a master architect to build a special palace just for the occasion. Within the edifice he builds seven adjoining apartments, each of a different kind of stone. This palace is to mirror on earth the seven heavens. Everywhere the artist places images of Joseph and Zulaykha in amorous poses. When Joseph accepts her invitation to the palace, Zulaykha entices him through the first door and locks it behind him. Then she pours out her heart to him and lures him into the second chamber, again locking the door. At last she manages to bring Joseph, against his better judgment, through the seventh door, locking it with an iron bolt and a golden chain. (See Fig. 38.)

Here Jami offers advice to the spiritual wayfarer: "One must never lose heart on the path: the pitch darkness of the night always gives way at last to daylight. Even if a hundred doors should stay closed to your hopes, there is still no need to eat your heart out: knock at one more door, and suddenly it will open; and the way to your goal will be clear."¹⁷ To no avail the lover begs her beloved to stay. Putting all his trust in God, Joseph flees, each door flinging itself open before him. Zulaykha is left feeling like the fabled spider who labors to entangle the king's hunting falcon in her delicate web, only to watch heartbroken as the bird effortlessly breaks free to return to the king. The metaphor of the prophet as a royal falcon was already ancient in Jami's day and had been a favorite of earlier mystics like Rumi, for nothing can prevent this great bird from returning to the one who sent it on its mission.

As a result of his refusal, Joseph endures imprisonment; but Zulaykha is still more painfully imprisoned in her unrequited longing. As his life improves after his release, hers disintegrates. She grows old living in a hut along the roadside, hoping only for a glimpse of Joseph. One day he sees her as she glorifies God for reducing royalty (herself) to slavery and for making this former slave (Joseph) into a king. News of his interest restores Zulaykha's youth; at last the two are to be married. After they live a long and happy life together, Joseph dies. Not many days later the inconsolable lover plucks out her eyes and perishes from grief. Zulaykha's action recalls the blinding sadness of Jacob. Jami sums up her plight this way: "First she made herself blind to all that was not the beloved; then she laid down life itself for him. May a thousand graces be showered on her; and may the eyes of her seeing soul be bright with the sight of the beloved."¹⁸

Joseph is associated with other aspects of the visual arts as well. Baba Shah Isfahani's classic work on calligraphy, *Manners of Practice*, offers a good example of the second aspect of Joseph's aesthetic significance, his role as symbol of creative beauty. God, the first calligrapher, wrote on the heart of Adam and thus gave him the gift of knowledge. "The gleam of the sparks of that writing's light cast a glimmer of the sun of Joseph's beauty into the heart of Zulaykha, and made her famous through the world as a lover."¹⁹ Within the broader contexts both of God's cosmic creativity and of Joseph's place in the history of prophetic revelation, Joseph is a symbol of divine radiance.

At the pinnacle of human perfection, of course, stands the Prophet. According to a prominent mystical interpretation, all creation exists for, and as a result of, Muhammad's being. A classic historian of Persian culture, Dust Muhammad, makes explicit connections between Muhammad and Joseph.

In Dust Muhammad's preface to a sixteenth-century album of calligraphy and miniature paintings, he includes a poetic encomium of Muhammad. Dust Muhammad interprets the Prophet's virtually cosmic splendor as a fulfillment of Joseph's beauty. He begins with praise of the Creator's painterly accomplishments, inserts a note of moral exhortation reminiscent of the earlier homiletical poetry of Sana'i of Ghazna, and meditates on the relationship between physical and spiritual beauty.

Hail to the Creator who, without assistance, clothed being with existence by the command "Be!"

He quickened thousands of charming forms; neither did he use a magic incantation nor did he mix colors.

If a form is not worthy of astonishment, it is not worth the touch of the brush.

Why are you perplexed by this master painting when you know that it is necessary to amend your conduct?

If conduct is not pure and charming in essence, what is the use of a beautiful form?

When a man is ignorant in his being, he cannot be called human simply because of his form.

O God, I am that handful of dust that previously was void of my form and conduct.

Since you gave me human form first, make me share intrinsically in humanity.

Especially he who is the final goal of the world [Muhammad]: the final goal of the creative fiat is he.

In form he perfected Joseph's beauty; in conduct he quickens Gabriel's soul.²⁰

A short prose interlude explains further how even those whose vision of Joseph's beauty has already taken them to the limit of astonishment are moved beyond that with one glimpse of the Prophet.

Dust Muhammad observes further that beauty is not all joy. He would perhaps have agreed with the words of the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, "Beauty is only the first touch of terror we can barely stand. And it awes us so much because it so coolly disdains to destroy us."²¹ The wondrous comeliness of Joseph, like the presence of the fascinating mystery of Holiness, is also terrifying. "By Joseph was much agony created, but this beauty [that of Muhammad] has stirred up a different tumult." After tracing prophetic glory from Adam to Muhammad, the author descends, in classic Shi'i fashion, following a line of magnificence toward the realm of mere mor-

tals, from Muhammad through the twelve imams, "for were the hand of destiny to reopen the gate of prophecy, it would be opened to none other than their prophet-like beauty." At last, Dust Muhammad places his own patron, the Safavid prince Bahram Mirza, in this most exalted company; for it is only the patron's own magnificence, "his Saturnian exaltedness," and sensitivity to beauty that inclines him to decree "that the scattered folios of past and present masters should be brought out of the region of dispersal into the realm of collectedness."²² This poem is a superb illustration of the interplay of Joseph imagery with the doctrine of prophetic revelation and patronage of the arts.

JOSEPH AND PATRONAGE OF THE ARTS

Even though Joseph is not described precisely as a patron of the arts, he possesses many qualities of such a patron. And a number of artists have praised their patrons as latter-day Josephs. One of the most splendid Safavid illustrated manuscripts is Jami's *Seven Thrones (Haft awrang)*, commissioned by Prince Sultan Ibrahim Mirza and produced between 1556 and 1565. Jami's story of Joseph and Zulaykha is one of seven Persian mathnawis in that collection. Sultan Ibrahim Mirza apparently identified with Joseph. Several sections of the illustrated manuscript of Jami's poetry that Ibrahim Mirza had commissioned were completed in the year he was married and appointed to a governorship. In one section completed that year a miniature painting depicts the prophet Joseph's "bachelor party" on the eve of his wedding to Zulaykha. Lest the association escape the viewer of the painting, the artist inscribed the name Sultan Ibrahim Mirza prominently over the flame-haloed head of the prophet. The art historian Marianna Shreve Simpson concludes that this may be "a direct allusion to Sultan Ibrahim Mirza's own marriage, and perhaps even a portrayal of the prince in the idealized form of another, legendary groom."²³

Najm ad-Din Daya Razi provides another example of praise of a patron by association with Joseph. He dedicates the second version of his *Path of [God's] Servants* to the Saljuqid Sultan Kay Qubad. Razi evidently intended to present the work as a gift to the sultan, in the hope that the ruler would take the author under his beneficent patronage. In his explanation of his reasons for writing the book, Razi pays the sultan the supreme compliment of comparing him to Joseph. God, says the author, noticed how fine a creation this new book was. God then told him to "[t]ake as a gift a necklace of these precious jewels . . . and present them to that servant whom We have chosen, that monarch whom We have raised up; who in Our Potiphar-like pres-

ence is like Joseph raised to honor from the well." (Kay Qubad had suffered imprisonment and mistreatment at the hands of his envious brother Kay Kawus.)²⁴

JOSEPH AS TEACHER AND INTERPRETER OF DREAMS

The great eighteenth-century Indian Muslim Shah Wali Allah of Delhi composed a fascinating short work entitled *The Interpretation of Tales (Ta'wil al-ahadith)*. He took the title from Qur'an 12:6, in which Joseph's father, Jacob, tells his son that God will bestow on the youth this special gift. Shah Wali Allah interprets a later remark by Joseph (Q 12:101, "My Lord, to me You have given an authority and have instructed me in the interpretation [ta'wil] of events, You who have created the heavens and the earth") as an indication that the prophet was a Friend of God, like the author himself. He goes a step further and concludes that he, like Joseph, has been granted the ability to interpret tales.

Shah Wali Allah explains that Joseph received "associative perspicacity," which he defines as "the capacity of visualizing basic concepts through images arising from the individual unconscious (*tabi'a*), inasmuch as such is postulated by the collective unconscious (*at-tabi'at al-kulliyah*) when effusing an archetypal truth into an individual."²⁵ Najm ad-Din Daya Razi makes a similar connection between Joseph and the teaching shaykh. He quotes the same Qur'anic text (12:101) with its references both to authority and the ability to interpret mysteries. The seeker needs a shaykh "to explain the visions" of the seeker and "unveil his states to him, gradually teaching him the language of the unseen, and acting as his teacher and translator."²⁶

Finally, the anonymous mirror for princes called *The Sea of Precious Virtues* records a reference to the prophet Joseph as a model of the Greater Jihad, the ongoing discipline of the spiritual life. The book cites Qur'an 12:52, which refers to the moment in which it becomes known that Zulaykha, not Joseph, was the aggressor: "This discovery has been made so that my lord (Pharaoh's minister) might know that I was not unfaithful to him in his absence." The book then explains that just when that truth becomes known, the angel Gabriel appears to the prophet. Though Joseph found himself attracted to Zulaykha, the angel explains, it was God who showed him a sign and kept him from sinning. At that moment Joseph speaks the following verse (Q 12:53), "Every soul is prone to evil," meaning according to *The Sea of Precious Virtues*, "without God's grace and protection this erring soul would never turn away from sin."²⁷

JOSEPH AS MODEL FOR MYSTICS

The Qur'anic story mentions more than once that God chose to bestow on Joseph the gift of "the interpretation of stories/events" (*ta'wil al-ahadith*, 12:6, 21, 101). With that special quality he models not only the shaykh as teacher but the mystic who has the gift of articulating his own experience as well.

As a prophet, Joseph was granted a lofty spiritual state, and his story provides imagery for analyses of profound religious experience. Many spiritual writers have discerned in Joseph qualities that parallel many of the stations and states that they consider markers along the spiritual path. Describing for his hearers an aspect of progress on that path, 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani speaks of the importance of the virtues for which Joseph was renowned: patience, contentment, reflective silence, and modesty. God will lead the seeker whose conduct is characterized by these qualities upward along the path, and the seeker will hear the words once spoken to Joseph, "You are today in our presence established and worthy of trust." The shaykh explains that although outwardly it was the pharaoh who thus rewarded Joseph with high authority, in reality it was God who spoke those words. To all appearances Joseph was given the kingdom of Egypt, but the inner meaning is that God gave Joseph the kingdom of the spirit. Jilani reads the scripture metaphorically as a reference to the spiritual power of which Joseph's temporal authority is but a shadow. In this way Joseph's experience is a model for the mystic.²⁸

Joseph is also used as a model of mystical experience in a letter from the eighteenth-century Moroccan mystic Ahmad ibn Idris to his follower Muhammad al-Majdhub. Ahmad counsels Muhammad to write down all the good news (*mubashshirat*) that descends upon him, then recalls the example of the Prophet, who

used to ask his companions after morning prayer: "Those of you who have had a vision (tonight), let them tell it!" It is counted as an instance of revelation, and one should not disregard revelation, for God, glory to Him, does not cause it to no purpose. Think of the story of Joseph, peace be with him: he preserved his vision, together with his father, for long years; and when its true meaning became evident in the world of senses he said immediately—for throughout this long time he had always kept it in mind: "O my father! this is the fulfillment of my vision of old! My Lord hath made it come true!"²⁹

The major prophets have long been associated with specific heavenly spheres as well. For the Indian mystic Shah Wali Allah, Joseph represents

the fourth of seven "regions" through which a mystic must pass on the journey toward God. In that capacity Joseph, along with Abraham, possesses special insight into creation. On the other hand, Joseph's love for the minister's wife also underscores the prophet's humanity and need of divine protection.³⁰

The Joseph story has offered renowned Muslim writers a way to interpret the most mundane difficulties they experienced at the hands of their critics and detractors. No prophet has felt more deeply than Joseph the sting of rejection by those close to him, those on whose support he thought he could depend. The martyred Sufi 'Ayn al-Qudat al-Hamadani likens himself to the prophet Joseph, whose brothers' envy prompted them to attack Joseph and even to accuse their father of error. He concludes that if "the sons of prophets dared to act thus towards their brother and their father on account of envy, it is not surprising if men like ourselves should commit wrongs many times as great against total strangers."³¹ Rumi too saw in his own experience a reflection of Joseph's trials. Rumi's family were so jealous of his friendship with his mystical alter ego, Shams of Tabriz, that they plotted to kill Shams.³²

Islam's poets have also found in the various critical moments of Joseph's life symbols through which mystics might interpret and describe equally critical experiences in their quest for God. The well and prison into which Joseph is thrown refer to all forms of adversity through which one must live in patience and trust. Allusions to Joseph's shirt have come to mean any experience that restores the blinded seeker's sight. The expression "to cut one's hand," an allusion to the guests at Zulaykha's dinner party, has become a coded reference to the seeker's experience of stark bewilderment in the presence of the Beloved. And Joseph's necessary separation from, and eventual reunion with, his father offers a perfect pattern to console the lover of God who seems to experience God's absence. Most of all, Joseph's beauty keeps the poets enthralled as the most apt image for the deepest of all experiences, the ever-present yearning for the source of all life and being. As Rumi writes of his own experience of longing for the Beloved, "Like Jacob I am crying alas, alas; the fair visage of Joseph of Canaan is my desire."³³

These are only a few of the countless examples of Joseph as a symbol of so many dimensions of the spiritual life of Muslims. As the Qur'an concludes its "most beautiful of stories": "In their tales is instruction for people of insight. This is no newly concocted story, but a verification of its precursors, an explanation of all things, and a source of guidance and mercy for people of faith" (12:111).