

Benjamin

The brother of Joseph (Yusuf, see Joseph). Identified in the Bible as the son of Jacob (q.v.) and Rachel, Benjamin (Binyamin) is not mentioned by name in Q 12, the sura which tells the story of Joseph. Of the eighteen dramatis personae of this sura, only Joseph is named directly. Nevertheless the identity of Benjamin is clear and his presence in the story exemplifies the effectiveness of the referential character of quranic rhetoric.

Benjamin is referred to on the following occasions: When the brothers complain "Joseph and his brother (i.e. Benjamin) are dearer to our father than are we: (Q 12:8); when they plot to rid themselves of him; when Joseph, while giving his brothers corn after having been established in Egypt, orders them, "Bring me another brother of yours by your father" (Q 12: 39); when they say to Jacob on their return to Cannan, "Father, we are not to be given any more corn! So send our brother with us" (Q 12: 63); when Jacob responds to them, "Shall I entrust him to you other than as I entrusted to you his brother long ago?" (Q 12: 64); and in Jacob's reluctant words of consent, "I will not send him with you unless you make a pledge before God that you will bring him back to me" (Q 12: 66).

Additionally, back in Egypt there are quranic references, when Joseph takes Benjamin aside and says to him, "Truly, I am your brother" (Q 12: 69); when Joseph has his cup (see cups and vessels) put in the saddle bag of his brother (Q 12: 70) from which it is taken (Q 12: 76); when the brothers make an excuse for him, saying, "If he has stolen something, he has a brother who also stole" (Q 12: 77); when the brothers plead to Joseph to take one of them in Benjamin's place, since he "has an aged father" (Q 12: 78); prompting Joseph's response, "God forbid that we should take other than the one on whom we found our property" (Q 12:79). Further, when they return to Cannan to tell their father; "Father, your son has stolen" (Q 12: 81); and Jacob exclaims, "Perhaps God will bring them all back to me" (Q 12: 82); and orders them, "Go, search for Joseph and his brother" (Q 12: 87). Finally, after their return to Egypt and to Joseph's presence, he asks them, "Do you know what you

did to Joseph and his brother?” (Q 12: 89); and after their hesitant reply he declares, “I am Joseph, and this is my brother” (Q 12: 90).

Every reference to Benjamin has a role in the development of the narrative (see narratives): not, paradoxically, because of anything he says or does, but simply through his relationship to Joseph. It is jealousy of Benjamin as well as of Joseph that precipitates the events of the story (Q 12: 8). It is through Benjamin that Joseph first exercises power over his brother (Q 12: 59). It is through Benjamin that Joseph puts his other sons to the test, to discover whether they will be faithful to their pledge. The discovery of the cup in Benjamin’s saddle bag in Q 12: 76 plays a pivotal role. The brothers’ response to his arrest shows that they are faithful to their pledge (Q 12: 78, 80). Benjamin is the agent of their change of heart. Jacob’s order to his sons to search for Joseph and his brother (Q 12: 87) leads to the narrative’s denouement when Joseph reveals his identity to them (Q 12: 90). The tensions that generated the story at a literary level are thereby resolved and the moral lessons of the sura thereby confirmed.

The close fraternal relationship between Benjamin and Joseph is a leitmotiv in the quranic story (see brother and brotherhood). The brothers are envious of Joseph and his brother; Jacob asks the brothers whether he can trust Benjamin with them any more than he trusted them with Benjamin’s brother Joseph (Q 12: 64); when revealing himself to Benjamin, Joseph says to him, “I am your brother” (Q 12: 69); Joseph’s cup is placed and found “in his brother’s saddle bag” (Q 12: 70, 76); the brothers’ excuse for Benjamin’s supposed theft is that he also had a brother who stole; Jacob sends the sons back to Egypt to seek Joseph and his brother; upon their return, Joseph puts to them the question, “Do you know what you did to Joseph and his brother?” and in revealing himself, says, “I am Joseph and this is my brother.”

The Muslim exegetical tradition elaborates these elements in the story. Quranic commentators had no problem in identifying Benjamin and in noting that his mother Rachel died giving birth to him. Both commentary literature on the Quran as well as the Muslim literary genre known as the “tales of the prophets” (qisas al - anbiya) elaborated the elements of the core quranic narrative that emphasized the positive role of Benjamin and that showed the love between two brothers. The later Islamic mystical tradition, inspired by their closeness, saw in Joseph’s love for Benjamin a metaphor for God’s primordial love of the sinner (see sufism and the Quran). See also scripture and the Quran.

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