

JOSEPH IN PRISON

The overall purpose of this story is to show that God is in charge. Joseph is “used” to further Israel’s destiny. Events are planned ahead, and they run counter to all normal expectations. Neither the planning nor the unfolding of events is being done by any human agent. If you believe the story of Joseph, you’ve had it! You can never be the same or see things in the same way ever again. And if God was active in such a way in the lives of people and in the events of the world then, what about now?

It raises questions of “providence” and “predestination.” (Is there a difference?) God will have God’s way – one way or another. We can cooperate, or we can resist. Or maybe, if we are very, very lucky – and truly unimportant – we can just wait it out?

The purposes of God are partially “hidden” from the view of the participants. The early dreams of Joseph announce the plan, but they seem too vague and unlikely at the time, even to Joseph. Are God’s purposes usually carried by those who trust that God has hidden purposes? And does the rest of humanity play only bit parts? What about our own lives? Do we expect God to be doing unusual things with our lives? Do we expect a surprising turn of events? At least from time to time?

Joseph is a hard worker. He works hard for Potiphar, hard in prison, hard for Pharaoh. He has unusual spiritual gifts and he trains and uses them, always giving God the credit for them. We only see him in comfortable, off-hours with his brothers and family for brief moments at the end of the story. It was no easy task to oversee all of Egypt: build the granaries; organize the tax on grains and enforce it; accomplish the storing, protection, and distribution of grain during seven years of famine. Can we imagine the bureaucracy, the black market, the graft, the bribery, the stealing, etc.?

When did this happen? Tradition says about ... but wait a minute. Which tradition? The biblical tradition (that is, the attempt to date based on internal information from the biblical narrative) says it took 430 years for the Egyptian sojourn, but does this include the time the patriarchs

spent in Canaan? If so, there are 645 years from the entrance into Canaan until the exodus with Moses. If we are not counting the patriarchs, then 215 years were spent in Egypt (from Joseph to the Exodus). Thus, Abraham entered Canaan in either 2090 B.C. or 1875 B.C. (Paul favors 1875 B.C.) (Galatians 3:16-17) Clearly it is precarious to get firm dates from genealogies, where numbers are strange or maybe even symbolic, and Jacob starts having children at 80 years of age, etc. Nevertheless, the first temple was built in the 480th year from the Exodus (4th year of Solomon's reign, or 966 B.C.). That would date the Exodus in 1445, the birth of Moses in 1525, and the beginning of the Conquest of Canaan (under Joshua) in 1405. Something along this line is the dating of the biblical tradition.

The scholarly world tries to find evidence from secular history, archaeology, and ancient records. Their attempts to reconstruct the chronology of the past is inclined to date the Exodus much later – in the 1200s rather than the 1400s. Who cares? It's interesting how often I am asked that question. Some people think it is important to downplay any special significance to Jewish history. Moses and the Israelites were a small community in comparison to the vast sweep of mighty empires all around them. Hence it is inappropriate to think of them as making any significant contributions to art, literature, religion, or culture. And of course, the later the dating for Moses and the Exodus, the more chance there is that other people brought the important innovations and breakthroughs into being, not the Hebrews or the Hebrew God.

It is still true that the Hebrew God was the first God understood to be beyond and outside all nature. But monotheism – the worship of one supreme God – was not new with Judaism. That had been ushered in by the Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaton (Ikhнатon, Amenhotep). The sun god (still of nature) Aten, or Aton, was the only true God. As most of us know by now, Akhenaton and his radical new religion were extremely unpopular, and his views were vigorously suppressed the moment he died. But it is still important for some scholars to proclaim that he could not have been influenced by Moses; if there was any influence, it went the other way, because Moses came after Akhenaton. Of course, that requires dating the Exodus in the 1200s rather than the 1400s, where the biblical timeline would place him. Were your parents married before or after you were born? Who cares? Probably nobody.

Among many other intriguing “wild” theories is the wonderment about a connection between the Hyksos dynasty in Egypt and Joseph. That there was a Hyksos takeover (from around 1667-1559, or 108 years) is well documented. Sometimes called “The Shepherd Kings,” they ruled Egypt but were clearly a different culture, leaving few records or monuments (presumably because they were less “civilized”). Egyptians called them *Heqau Khasut*, meaning “rulers of foreign hill-countries.” Taking advantage of a weak period in Egyptian rulers, they were able to dominate most of the Nile valley. They worshipped the Egyptian god Seth, whom they equated with one of their own Semitic deities (this from an Egyptian perspective). Their principal cities were Avaris and Sharuhén, though in 1667 they had captured Memphis, the administrative capital of Egypt at the time. The Hyksos ruled, as if uneasily, from border cities on the eastern side of the realm. Avaris was on the eastern border (almost to the Suez Canal), and Sharuhén, apparently their capital city, was about four miles southwest of modern Gaza. To make the innuendo clear: the Hyksos hugged the Palestine side of Egypt. Were they from Palestine? Were they, in fact, the dynasty that came to power in Egypt because Pharaoh had appointed Joseph to govern Egypt?

It doesn’t mean a thing, but the Bible says Solomon began to build the temple in the fourth year of his reign, and that this was 480 years from the Exodus. That would put the Exodus in 1445 B.C. Again, according to the biblical hint that the Hebrews were in Egypt for 215 years, that would date Joseph’s rise to power in 1660 B.C. But that’s at the end of the Hyksos dynasty rather than at its beginning. So forget that!

In any case, most historians are loath to claim any connection between the Hyksos and the Hebrews. Be that as it may, we know a time when strangers – Semitic “rulers of foreign hill-countries” – were the dominant rulers of Egypt. Hard not to be reminded of the Joseph story. Flavius Josephus (Jewish historian from the first century A.D.) equates the expulsion of the Hyksos from Egypt with the Exodus under Moses. But the dates are too early to coincide with the usually accepted understanding of ancient chronology. Clearly the Hebrews were not strong enough or organized well enough to accomplish such a thing – that is, the capture of Egypt. But then, under Joseph, that was not necessary. In any case, if the Hyksos were not connected to the Joseph story, then who were they? And where did they come from? Annoyingly elusive.

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So let's get to the story.

In the beginning was the dream (Genesis 37): *“your sheaves bowed down to my sheaf.”* Then a second dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars bowing down to Joseph. Not very obscure: Father, Mother, and eleven brothers. If anyone had known the full meaning and purpose of the dream – had known that this was necessary to save all of their lives – perhaps that would have minimized some of the jealousy and made things easier. But humans seldom see things easily, especially not the long-range plans of God. So we try to kill the dream, either by the way we live or by the things we are living for. Failing that, we can try to kill the dreamer. That's one way to get things back to “normal” – back in line with our regular expectations. But I'm not making fun of you; I'm making fun of me.

At least Joseph is sold into slavery. A close call! Greed overcomes murder. Fortunately, Satan's realms are not always effective and efficient either. In any case, Jacob mourns and the brothers are rid of Joseph – or so they think. They *think* they have killed the dream. Of course, they do not realize that the dream is their only hope. They *do* think that the dream is powerless, just because they don't like it and because they are against it – and then of course because they have gotten rid of the dreamer.

Meanwhile, Joseph succeeds in Egypt beyond all wild imagination. Soon he is running Potiphar's entire household. But just as things seem to be going rather well, Joseph faces temptation and deceit. Trying to be faithful and obedient costs him his position and he is thrown into prison. (Genesis 39:6-20) What an idiot. All he had to do was enjoy himself with Potiphar's wife. Opportunity had knocked; all Joseph had to do was knock back. Then these ridiculous words follow: *“But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison.”* (39:21) Most of us think there should be better evidence for God's steadfast love than making us look good in the eyes of the prison warden. How about a little steadfast love *before* we end up in prison?

Nevertheless, in prison Joseph succeeds again, and soon he interprets more dreams. But he himself is forgotten. From all apparent evidence, he is forgotten by all – God included. The “forgotten man” theme is full of pathos. It only takes us a few minutes to read about it, but for Joseph the days drag on and on. For all he knows, this prison

term will last for the rest of his life. Can you ever remember feeling that way?

Until one day, when Pharaoh himself is troubled by dreams, suddenly the butler (cupbearer) remembers – and God remembers – and Joseph becomes the man of the hour, and of the kingdom. I think most of you know about Pharaoh’s dreams: the seven fat cows, and the seven lean ones that ate them up; the seven ears of grain, lush and full, and the seven blighted ears that swallowed them up. Joseph interprets the dreams to be a warning of seven good years with abundant harvests, followed by seven lean years of severe famine.

So Joseph becomes the Grand Vizier – the High Chancellor of all Egypt. Pharaoh puts him in charge of everything and gives him his signet ring. Joseph builds store cities and fills them with the abundant harvests of the seven fat years. Then the famine comes. Eventually hunger drives Joseph’s brothers from Canaan to Egypt. There is food for sale in Egypt, and they have to buy food or the whole clan of Jacob will die.

Where is there a more poignant or more dramatic story than this telling of the sons of Jacob – Joseph’s brothers – when they come to Egypt to buy food? They do not recognize Joseph in all his glory and finery. But of course Joseph recognizes them. He speaks only through an interpreter, and he plays things out with consummate skill and increasing suspense.

The brothers are still controlled by their guilt, even after all these years. They do not see themselves as carriers of the promise, so they are locked-in to preserving Jacob, their father, and keeping their secret. They have no thought that the dream is still alive, but neither are their lives going anywhere.

And then the dream begins to come true: they bow before him. (42:6; 43:28; 44:14) The brothers do not realize it yet, but the dream is happening. What they do know is that they deserve punishment for what they did to Joseph. And now they wonder, “What is this that God is doing to us?” (42:28) They expect evil, and can hardly imagine any other outcome.

Meanwhile, the grief of Jacob has gone unabated all these years. He fears for the loss of Benjamin, but it is also clear that he is still in mourning for Joseph. He has spent his declining years in mourning and pity. Joseph has told the brothers that there is no more food for them

unless they bring their youngest brother with them next time. (I'm skipping over things too quickly, but I need only remind you of the story.) Then the drama of the brothers – and the reunion of the family – begins to come to the fore, as the dream takes shape in earnest. The outward struggle is subtle but crucial: a tug-of-war over Benjamin. Father Jacob wants to keep him close, and brother Joseph wants to see him. Why this focus? Or is it just natural to the story? In any case, it is a tussle that shapes the plot, and it takes several (patient) years to resolve. Joseph, because of the famine and his position as the acting ruler of all Egypt, holds all the high cards.

In the end, Jacob tries to trust again. Finally, having no other choice, he tells his sons to take Benjamin back to Egypt with them. He doubles the money needed, and says: "*May El Shaddai – God of the mountain – grant you mercy ... If I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved.*" (43:14) Do we remember the story of Jacob and Esau from years gone by? Esau gets the last laugh: Jacob, now an old man, finds that it's *his* turn to sell his most precious possession (his son Benjamin) for pottage – for food. Without food from Egypt, his whole clan will continue to starve.

And then the culmination (45:1-15) – the key speech in the entire narrative:

1.) The dead one is alive! The abandoned one has returned in power! The dream has had its way. (Brueggemann) Joseph discloses his true identity, in one of the most poignant scenes in all literature: "*I am Joseph.*" (*Yosef* means "may God add," and again Joseph is added.) Joseph says: Put the past behind, and come live new lives – in a new reality – for I am Lord of all Egypt.

2.) Do not fear. Do not be dismayed. Do not be angry with yourselves. (45:3-5)

3.) "*God sent me before you to preserve life.*" (45:5) "*God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant.*" (45:7) "*It was not you who sent me here, but God; and he has made me father ... and lord ... and ruler*" (45:8)

The "family" now sees (like a thunderbolt) that this is all part of a divine plan – that the dream was beyond them all; that each one of them has an individual life *and* is also part of a larger fate and destiny.

Whatever the roles of the past, this realization brings everybody to a new moment – and to a new future. God has been behind it all the entire time, leading all of them toward a new future – a future bigger than any of them have imagined.

The deepest levels of forgiveness, especially forgiveness of ourselves, seem to always have this element at the center. When we feel ourselves a part of something so much larger than ourselves – and we see our mistakes in this light – it becomes sane to put our fear and guilt and shame behind us (if God is inviting us to do that) and participate in the adventure. So with Joseph and his brothers, they have done their work, but it has been God at work within and beyond all their work that has brought them all to life.

A touch of reality in the midst of the happy ending: The brothers are not yet rid of their guilt – or their fear. Such things cling to us more closely than we usually admit. Upon Jacob’s death, they fear that Joseph will still wreak vengeance upon them after all. But Joseph says to them: “You planned it for evil, but God used it for good.” Would that we could all learn to see and say such things to our enemies.

In any case, Joseph fully embraces Israel’s promise (and his father) and asks to be buried “in the land” upon his own death. (50:25) He makes his brethren promise that “when God comes to their aid,” they will carry his remains with them out of Egypt. Then he, too, waits for the promise to be fulfilled. And that is the end of Genesis, which means “The Beginning.”

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I cannot leave this story without mentioning my favorite part. Back when he is a young man and none of his incredible fame and success are yet known, Joseph finds himself running Potiphar’s household. He does it so well that Potiphar will never let him go. And it’s a good life for Joseph as well, being such a trusted servant in such a prominent and wealthy house. In short, Joseph is set for life.

So what is God to do? It is not God’s plan for Joseph to spend his life serving Potiphar. There is more important work to be done. Yet everything is set up for this to be the outcome. Until, with a little lust on the part of Potiphar’s wife, the balance is upset again. Joseph is in free-fall again.

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By the way, Joseph ends up in a very specialized prison – one controlled by Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh’s guards. In other words, Potiphar is in command of the Secret Service – the hand-picked elite of Pharaoh’s soldiers, responsible for protecting Pharaoh himself. This prison is just for special offenders against Pharaoh. If Potiphar had thought for one moment that Joseph was guilty of molesting or insulting his wife, Joseph would have been dead the following moment. But Potiphar knows his wife, and he also knows Joseph. He cannot ignore the charges that have now been publicly made against Joseph, so he does the only thing he can think of: he puts Joseph in the prison that he oversees and controls. No mystery that Joseph soon finds favor with the official who runs the prison.

But back to God’s problems: How can God get Joseph from running Potiphar’s household to running all of Egypt? Somehow God must break Joseph out of Potiphar’s employ and into Pharaoh’s employ. There is only one road, and it leads through prison.

For how many months or years does Joseph wonder what he has done wrong? For how many months or years does Joseph think he has been abandoned, or that his life is at a dead end, or that all his plans and dreams are foolish fantasy? And yet it seems, from what we can piece together, that Joseph does not despair. He is soon running the prison. He still trusts God to give him the true interpretation of dreams. It’s risky to be honest about the baker’s dream, don’t you think? In any case, Joseph does what he can, and he stays faithful, and he waits. In time, God brings it all around to where it belongs: back to the real plan, back to the true purpose. Only, Joseph has to stay true during the dark days, or that will undo all of God’s plans too.

I don’t know if that reaches you. It’s not the way humans like to think; it’s not the way we like to see things. But there it is. A little minor preview of cross before resurrection. One more reminder of the patient endurance we sometimes need because even God has to arrange things until the time is right and the pieces are in order.