

Joseph, Last of the Great Genesis Players

Joseph is the eleventh of twelve sons born to Jacob and the last major player in the Genesis account. As we consider Joseph, we will again be searching for the Divine message contained in this brief sketch. His account is limited mostly to a twenty year period between the ages of seventeen and thirty-seven and is characterized by a succession of good fortune followed by demoralizing crashes until Joseph finally rises to become the second most powerful man in Egypt.

Joseph, being the offspring of Jacob's beloved wife Rachel and "son of his old age," is clearly Jacob's favorite. Jacob makes this fact abundantly clear when he gives his son the famous "coat of many colors." But favoritism comes with a price and Joseph incurs the hatred of his brothers for it. His familial estrangement is aggravated when he reveals dreams wherein eleven sheaves bow down before his sheave and eleven stars, as well as the sun and moon, bow down before him also. The meaning was obvious to everyone. The family, including the mother and father, were subordinate to Joseph. The brothers disliked him all the more and even his father rebuked him. None suspected that Joseph's dreams were from God, but while "his brothers envied him... his father kept the matter in mind (Gen. 37:11)."

Joseph soon fell from favored son to lowly slave. Jacob sent Joseph to check on his brothers and the flocks they were tending. Continuing to burn with envy, the brothers conspired to kill Joseph and, except for Reuben's intervention, probably would have done so. But before Reuben could return Joseph to his father's care, the others sold him to a group of Ishmaelite traders. Thus, the saga of a twenty year separation of the young Joseph from his family began, as well as a series of improbable events that would challenge the faith of a battle hardened saint.

In spite of being sold into slavery, all was not perpetual suffering for Joseph. He was bought by an Egyptian by the name of Potiphar. The text records that "the Lord was with Joseph (Gen. 39:2)" and gave him great success at all that he put his hands to. As a result he rose to prominence in the house of Potiphar, having nothing withheld from him except his master's wife (Gen. 39:9). Joseph, in spite of the ill treatment that he had experienced at a youthful age, maintained his integrity before God. To his misfortune, his master's wife did not have the same moral scruples. Joseph was a handsome young man and Potiphar's wife desired him. After repeated advances that Joseph parried, she caught him one day alone in the house. He fled leaving his cloak behind in her grasp. Without a way of explaining how she came by the young Hebrew's garment, she accused Joseph of making improper advances upon her. In anger Potiphar placed Joseph in prison. Slavery was bad enough, but he had risen to a comfortable role in a prominent house. Now he was cast into a dismal prison for a crime he did not commit. Nevertheless, Joseph will not abandon his trust in God.

Even in prison Joseph fared well under God's guiding hand. The text records that "the Lord was with Joseph and showed him mercy, and He

gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison (Gen. 39:21).” Joseph became a prison foreman and a trusted man in the prison keeper’s sight. We find again that “whatever [Joseph] did the Lord made it prosper (Gen. 39:23).” While prison foreman cannot compare with estate manager, even in prison Joseph was blessed.

It is while Joseph is in prison that the plot thickens and we begin to see God’s purpose unfold. We find in chapter 40 that Pharaoh’s cupbearer and baker are consigned to prison and placed under Joseph’s oversight. They both have a dream and both are troubled by it. Joseph interprets the dreams and, as he explained them, the baker is promptly executed and the cupbearer is restored to his role in Pharaoh’s court. Joseph asked the cupbearer, when he is restored, to remember him in his undeserved plight, but, now that life for the cupbearer is once again good, he remembers not.

Two years later Joseph makes a meteoric rise from prisoner to power figure when Pharaoh has a horrible dream which his wise men cannot interpret. It is now that the cupbearer remembers Joseph and his ability to interpret dreams. Pharaoh calls for Joseph who immediately explains them. There is to be seven years of great harvest followed by seven years of severe famine. He advises Pharaoh to appoint a trusted officer to collect one fifth of the harvest during the prosperous years and store the excess grain. Pharaoh appoints this lowly Hebrew prisoner for the task because there is no other in the land like Joseph “in whom is the Spirit of God (Gen. 41:38).” Thus, Joseph survives family scorn and envy, a murder plot, slavery, false charges of sexual impropriety, and false imprisonment to become, as a foreigner, the second most powerful man in the ancient world. Next time we will see the conclusion of the story and the Divine purpose in it.