

Joseph: A Foreshadow of Christians?

Taking up with the close of our previous narrative, we find that, according to Pharaoh's dream and Joseph's interpretation thereof, the seven prosperous years have passed in Egypt, the surplus grain has been stored, and the seven years of famine has begun. Jacob's family in Canaan has not escaped the disaster. Hearing there is grain in Egypt, Jacob sends all his sons, except for his youngest, Benjamin, to purchase some. It is on this expedition that these brothers, who sold Joseph into slavery twenty years before, encounter him. Joseph recognizes his brothers, but they do not recognize him. Joseph, much older now and groomed as an Egyptian, speaks roughly with them and only through an interpreter, keeping his identity hidden. True to his character, he remembers the dreams of twenty years earlier and forsakes vengeance for their evil. He does, however, choose to put his brothers to a test. Having learned from them that they have another brother at home, he proceeds to accuse them of being liars and spies. To prove their integrity Joseph demands that one of them remain as a ransom while the rest return to bring Benjamin to Egypt. The brothers, unaware that their conversation can be understood by this presumed Egyptian, speak that their plight is recompense for their evil against Joseph so many years ago. They lament in Joseph's hearing, "We are truly guilty concerning our brother, for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear; therefore this distress has come upon us (Gen.42:21)." Joseph is moved to tears with this disclosure, but still he proceeds with his plan and Simeon is taken into custody while his brothers return for Benjamin.

When the brothers return with their terrifying tale, Jacob is bereaved. He does not trust this Egyptian ruler and considers Simeon now lost along with Joseph. He will not let Benjamin go to Egypt even after Reuben proposes to his father to "kill my two sons if I do not bring [Benjamin] back." It is not until they are again out of grain and Judah, the ancestor of the future Messiah, steps forward as an intercessor for Benjamin that Jacob relents to send his youngest to Egypt. Judah declares, "I myself will be surety for him; from my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back... then let me bear the blame forever (Gen.43:9)."

The brothers return to Egypt with Benjamin and once again come before Joseph. Upon seeing Benjamin, his full blood brother, he hastens away to weep. He regains his composure and continues with his plan to test his brothers. He frames Benjamin as a thief and declares he will keep him as a slave, but his brothers he sends home. Judah boldly and gallantly steps forward offering himself in the place of his brother (Gen.44:18-34). He had acknowledged that God had discovered their iniquity (Gen.44:16) and with anguished appeal intercedes on behalf of Benjamin and his father. Judah concludes, "Now... let your servant remain instead of the lad as a slave to my lord, and let the lad go up with his brothers." Judah's changed heart provides a secondary theme in the account of Joseph. Judah, in his selfless intercession, foreshadows the spirit of the one who will arise out of the line of Judah and intercede on the behalf of all mankind, Jesus Christ.

Judah's gesture immediately brings Joseph's story to a climax. Unable to restrain his emotions any longer, Joseph, dismissing all Egyptians from his presence and crying aloud with tears, reveals his identity. His brothers are speechless, probably from both disbelief and fear. Joseph reassures them, "[D]o not be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life (Gen.45:5)." He understood that while his brothers acted from evil hearts, "God meant it for good (Gen.50:19-20)." He saw himself as God's instrument of salvation for his family when he says, "And God sent me before you to preserve a posterity for you in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance (Gen.45:7)."

At this time Joseph's understanding of Divine purpose probably did not extend beyond the immediate preservation of his family. With no evidence that God had revealed to him anything of future events, he was unaware that the immediate deliverance was a foreshadow of two greater deliverances. The first would be, over four hundred years hence, the deliverance of the nation of Israel from Egyptian bondage, which itself would be a foreshadow of a still greater and final deliverance, the one of mankind from the bondage of sin by the hand of God through Jesus Christ. In this context Joseph appears as a foreshadow of the Christian who, in his role as a disciple of Christ, is sent into the world to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and to be an agent of deliverance to a lost world.

[Read Genesis 46-50]