

Joseph the Dreamer Sold into Slavery

You probably remember from the discussions surrounding Abraham and his near sacrifice of Isaac that I encouraged you to spend time with that text as it would pay dividends later when you encounter the writings of St. Paul in the New Testament. Here you have a similar opportunity. If you now spend some time with the character of the Old Testament Joseph, you should get an insight into the importance of the New Testament Joseph in the eyes of St. Matthew the Evangelist. It is our good fortune, thanks be to God, that we have much material about Joseph in the Book of Genesis with which to work.

The story of Joseph spans fourteen chapters in the Book of Genesis. By comparison, stories like the flood take up only five (six if you count the descendants of Noah as part of the story) and the story of Adam and Eve takes up only two chapters. Why then is roughly one-third of the Book of Genesis devoted to a character who, by most measures, doesn't figure all that prominently in the rest of the Old Testament? Joseph is almost forgotten once we begin the story of the Exodus. His name doesn't even endure as one of the names of the twelve tribes - that honor went to his sons.

The Book of Genesis is the first book of the Jewish Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). As such, Genesis serves as the launching pad for the rest of the story. And, since the rest of the story (Exodus to Deuteronomy) deals with the Israelites' escape from Egypt, we must first get our characters to Egypt. The story of Joseph is essential because it gets us where we need to be for the rest of the Torah.

The story of Joseph is also important because it helps establish the structure of the twelve tribes of Israel by giving names to and a little background information on the sons of Jacob (Genesis 49:1-28). For the Jewish people (especially once they began to recount their story from within the land of Canaan) the twelve-tribe structure was *the* way they identified themselves and was consequently of great import. Remember from the introduction, for the Jewish people the significance of the Sacred Scriptures was that these books helped to define them as a people and helped to answer the all-important questions of who they were and where they came from.

Whatever else the story of Joseph is or means in the context of Sacred Scripture (and we will investigate the multitude of meanings over the next few sections) it is first and foremost a *really good story*. Joseph's story spans chapters 37-50 and moves from the Patriarchs and the foundation of the twelve tribes to the Exodus (a transitional story) that sets up the rise of Moses, the lawgiver and the great deliverer of the Jews.

Almost as a side note in the story of Joseph we learn of Judah, one of the other sons of Jacob. Judah played a minor role in the Joseph account (just one of the crowd so to speak). However, from the tribe of Judah came David and from David came Jesus.

I promised in the introduction that I would not trot out Old Testament source criticism and it is a promise I have kept throughout our lessons together. However, in this great story of Joseph I have to bring this up briefly. Remember that in the first part of Genesis, which we called the Primordial History in the introduction, there seemed to be a blending of two sources: the Priestly (the author who was concerned with genealogy and God's divine majesty) and the Yahwist (the author who was concerned with a more hands-on God).

In this section of the Book of Genesis we also find what biblical scholars have termed the Elohist source. In addition to primarily using *Elohim* as the Hebrew name for God, the Elohist often includes dramatic dialogue and tension in the narrative. If you get to a section that feels like a "nail-biter" you are probably entering the realm of the Elohist. The story of Joseph is one that contains elements of dramatic tension.

First, let's examine the character of Joseph from a literary standpoint. He was the youngest of Jacob's children and his favorite (Genesis 37:3). Because of the favoritism showed to Joseph, he attracted the enmity of his brothers. Before we rush ahead to the major conflict let's pause and remember that the Book of Genesis began with a similar idea, albeit with only two characters, Cain and Abel. In that story, the favoritism shown the younger brother by the Father (in that case our Heavenly Father) resulted in the first murder. In addition, recall the story of Jacob and Esau in which the younger favorite drew the enmity of his elder brother (and to be fair in this case the enmity was justified). The story of Jacob and Esau from the last lesson helps explain the model of forgiveness that continues to develop throughout Sacred Scripture. The story of Joseph and his brothers fits into this model.

As with Jacob and Esau, the narrative of Joseph and his brothers contains ample material about the horrendous treatment of the favorite brother. The enmity started innocently enough when Joseph revealed a dream in which he saw himself in a position of importance over his brothers (Genesis 37:6-8). From this enmity grew the brother's plot to do away with Joseph. Most biblical commentators attribute this plot to the Elohist source because of the tension-filled dialogue found in the rest of Genesis Chapter 37.

A tremendous offense was committed (selling one's brother into slavery, and then lying to one's father causing him to believe that his favorite was killed by a wild beast, was indeed a horrendous wrongdoing). Reconciliation between the effected parties would indeed seem to be impossible.

Before we discuss the reconciliation and are given another wonderful example of biblical forgiveness, we should learn a little more about Joseph. Once we see how God acted in Joseph and how Joseph acted toward God, when he meets his brothers again, his behavior will be better understood. But we have to spend a little time with Joseph the Dreamer first.