

Joseph's Rise to Power and his Brother's Visits

As I mentioned in the earlier chapter, the stories of Joseph can almost be a stand-alone story in the bible. It has intrigue, a very kind and sympathetic hero, drama and, most importantly for this author, a happy ending. Yet we cannot forget that, for all its dramatic impact, this story has a very real purpose in the history of the Jews. Genesis is the beginning of their saga and offers an explanation of how they moved from Canaan, the land of the promise, to Egypt, the land of slavery.

This section begins with more examples of how intelligent and blessed Joseph is. With foresight, Joseph decides to lay up stores of grain when the harvest times are bountiful. Then in the time of famine - precipitated by a drought that caused the agrarian economy of the Egyptians to collapse - the forward planning of Joseph saves not only the day but countless lives as well.

This famine motivates those in the outlying areas - in this case Canaan - to gravitate to the granaries of Egypt. The stage is set for a reunion of Jacob's sons, but in the midst of this wonderful story the author includes a bit of dramatic tension. He does so that when Joseph's real identity is eventually revealed it will have the proper import. To illustrate this I will gravitate briefly into the world of narrative analysis. There are several circumstances that help elevate the tension level of the story:

- (Genesis 42:1-5) ... The brothers go to Egypt for food and Jacob orders that Benjamin (the youngest brother to whom Joseph was closest) be left behind in Canaan.
- (Genesis 42:6-17) ... Joseph, although he recognizes his brothers, imprisons them
- (Genesis 42:18-28) ... Joseph gives grain to his brothers, but mysteriously (for them) accepts no money
- (Genesis 42:29-34) ... Joseph demands that Simeon be left behind and that the other brothers bring Benjamin to Egypt
- (Genesis 42:35-38) ... Back in Canaan, Jacob refuses to let Benjamin go

This drama continues until we get to the resolution of the Joseph story in chapter 45, which culminates in one of the happier endings in the Bible. In the end Joseph is reunited with his family and he forgives his brothers.

The Role of Egypt in the Old Testament

Before we reach the happy conclusion to the story of Joseph, a few words should be said about the importance Egypt and the role it will play in the biblical narrative of the Old Testament from this point forward. For the nomadic Jews, the highly civilized country to the west would have been somewhat daunting.

A great military power like Egypt was a threat to the surrounding smaller countries on its borders. At roughly the time Joseph's story is taking place (somewhere around thirteen or fourteen centuries before Our Lord) Egypt was a mighty empire which had existed a very long time if you date the formation of the first unified kingdom to 3150 B.C. The Jews of the time must have been in awe of such a power. Their fear was justified for nothing could stop the war chariots of Egypt (short of a miraculous wave of water, which we will get to in the next book of the bible). The Jewish lands lay in Egypt's path if she chose to invade Palestine on her way to the richer rewards of what will later be known as Syria.

Egypt and the civilization which sprang up around the Nile, will serve figuratively as a place of exile in the rest of the bible. When the Jews write these stories for the final time, they are in yet another place of exile, this time Babylon. Thus, when they are compiling their history as captives in the pagan heart of the Middle East (Babylon) they are also remembering their time of exile, slavery and abandonment in Egypt. This time on Babylon colors their remembrances of that earlier time as captives of the Egyptians. In Egypt, where the Jews were first separated from their homeland, it appeared that the promise of God to be with them always seemed to be in jeopardy. It is in this place that they would seek their first savior (Moses) who would rescue them from captivity and return them to the land which they were promised. Throughout the Bible, Egypt looms largely as the mighty power to the west as well as a place to which one might flee if circumstances in Canaan became threatening or intolerable. Many will make the journey from Canaan to Egypt and back with the sons of Jacob. Moses, their eventual liberator, will be most important in the Old Testament. Later in the New Testament, especially in the Gospel of St. Matthew, we will see the importance of Egypt yet again as a place of refuge.

The Fathers and Genesis: St. John Chrysostom

*Still, I am inclined to think that it all happened as a result of the dispensation of the God of all so that they would fail to recognize their brother either from conversing with him or by sight. After all, how on earth would they have formed such an idea? I mean they were under the impression that he had become a slave to the Ishmaelites and by now was enduring slavery under the barbarians. Whereas they were in no position to conceive any other idea and so recognize Joseph, he recognized them as soon as he saw them and took every care to conceal his identity, wishing to deal with them as foreigners. **Homilies on the Genesis, 64.5***

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