

Joseph and Pharaoh's Dreams

September 13, 2020

The scripture for today (Sunday) takes us from Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers to his appearance before Pharaoh, to interpret his dreams. A good bit happened in between. Joseph happened to be bought by a master, Potiphar, who appreciated him and treated him kindly. That is, until his wife tried to seduce Joseph, then claimed he had tried to seduce her. That landed Joseph in prison.

This would have been unusual. Normally death would be the fate of a slave that behaved as Joseph was alleged to have. Long duration prison sentences are a relatively modern phenomenon. In antiquity, and even much later, the cost of “warehousing” criminals was simply not economically viable. Instead, they'd be used in salt mines or lead mines, as rowers in the galleys, or other dangerous work which would result in death after a while. (For example, the Soviets used German prisoners of war as slaves in the lead mines of Siberia long after the war was over. There's an interesting book written by one who escaped, *As Far as my Feet will Carry Me*, that I recall reading when I was young.) Jails were usually temporary holding places for men whose cases had not yet been decided. Later the baker and the butler are such temporary residents as their fates are considered.

Notice that the prison is described as where Pharaoh's prisoners were kept. Potiphar was an officer, the captain of the guard, so this made sense. The word “officer”, the generic position under an ancient king, is literally “eunuch”. But the identification of Potiphar as captain of the guard, and the fact that he had a wife, suggests that he wasn't literally a eunuch. Ancient kings were in fact often attended by eunuchs, who were considered safer, because they would not betray the king for the sake of family.

It may be that Potiphar just had not decided what to do with Joseph yet. Maybe he had doubts about his wife's story, but could not be seen to have done anything less, given the accusation. We just don't know. But for one reason or another Joseph is “forgotten” and stays in jail for years. It wasn't such a bad place to be. He found favor with the “keeper of the prison,” and as it turned out, he met important and interesting people: the king's butler and baker.

Let's pause for a minute. Is this the same Joseph we were reading about last week? The spoiled brat with dreams of lording it over his brothers? How Joseph responds to his situation is interesting. It isn't fair. Joseph knows it isn't fair (see 40:15). He was supposed to be the Child of Promise. He was his father's favorite. And now a slave? How would most of us in this modern world react to such

adversity? I can imagine shouting at God, “Where are you? This is unfair!” Well, from a human point of view it is unfair. Life often isn’t fair. An Atheist would argue this is evidence that there is no God – a good God would not allow such things to happen. In such a situation, a person could easily give up on life and lament, “Just let me die,” as Elijah does as he flees from Jezebel (I Kings 19:4).

That’s not what Joseph does. He does the best he can in the situation he is in. If he is sentenced to be a slave, he decides to be a good and useful slave, rather than an angry and rebellious slave. Where did he learn this? How as a pampered child growing up, did he gain the wisdom to respond this way? Maybe Jacob told Joseph, and maybe all his sons, about his own story. He likely did; they didn’t have television to substitute for dialog and important family stories back then. We read “the LORD was with Joseph” (39:2), but Joseph had to recognize and accept the LORD’s blessing, and he did. Getting back to this point in the story, he does not claim superior insight for himself. Rather, he said that it is God who actually interprets dreams (40:8). His interpretation of the two dreams came true just as he had told them. His credentials as one who can interpret dreams brought him to Pharaoh’s attention in today’s scripture lesson 41:25-40.

We don’t have the Joseph story from any source independent of the Bible. That’s true for almost everything through the time of David. In fact, many scholars doubted the existence of a historical King David, but an inscription to the “House of David” was finally found within the last few decades. There were, of course, kings of Egypt called “Pharaoh” but there is no way to identify with any confidence the Pharaoh of the Joseph story. The Biblical timeline (as literally followed) would put the Joseph story about 1900 B.C. But numbers and years in the Bible are mostly from a relatively late thread of writing, the “P” (Priestly) source, and it’s hard to have confidence in such numbers. Joseph might have been as late as a few hundred years later. There had to be time between Joseph and David for the Israelites to become a fairly powerful nation, not up to empire status, but able to maintain independence in the absence of a superpower. That requires several hundred years.

The reason I bring this up is the “bigger picture” of what was happening globally about the time of the Joseph story. The world was changing. Before the dawn of civilization, the middle east, indeed the whole world, was different. The Sahara was not the desert that it is now; it was at least somewhat green. The world as a whole was colder, meaning that the band of territory from Egypt north was more or less a temperate zone. I’m working from memory, I’ll admit, but it seems to me that it was about 5000 B.C., maybe even earlier, when the climate began to

change. It became drier. Farming had been established by then. Irrigation came into use about 6000 B.C., perhaps a response to the change. The first cities started to appear. Instead of everyone being an independent clan of wanderers, humanity was forced to organize as there was not as much fruitful property relative to the population. The climate change was not gradual, but in spurts. There were a series of big changes, and one of those seems to have occurred at about the same time as the Joseph story. It's the story of years of abundance terminating in years of starvation.

As the climate turned from temperate to dry rather suddenly, people were forced to go where there was water. The Nile River was a reliable source of water in an otherwise now arid region. Those who had the power to control such property, as Pharaoh did, could then essentially dictate terms. Otherwise, whoever was most powerful seized control, and then they were in position to dictate terms. This was the evolution of Civilization during the time of the Patriarchs. Abram was a wandering nomad, encountering small independent cities like Haran and Salem (better known now as Jerusalem) and Sodom here and there. Recall that Abraham, like Jacob and his sons later, sought refuge in Egypt during a famine. Through the circumstances forced by the agricultural crisis, power was consolidated into powerful monarchies and then empires. Was that bad? Good? Here in the Joseph story we get a good glimpse of how this played out. (I'll add that this trend toward a drier and less fertile Middle East did not end in Biblical times. The region is more arid now than it was in the time of Jesus.)

Something to be thinking about as we read this story is the role of the King. Or, more generally, government. Originally the Israelites were a wandering tribe, the Children of Israel. That is, life was governed by the Patriarch. They were a literal "family," and the Patriarch, Jacob, knew each of their names. By the time Moses led them out of Egypt, they were too numerous to just be one family, even as "Children of Israel." They were in effect a collection of "tribes," each led by tribal patriarchs and elders, kept together by the leadership of Moses, and later Joshua. That continued into the time of the Judges. There was no human national leader except transient "Judges" who would appear in moments of crisis. The Israelites wanted a more powerful central authority, a king, who would lead them and provide for the common defense against enemies. Also, to represent them before God so that the king, rather than they, would bear the responsibility. That's what they got, with the various forms of corruption that went with it. The kingship failed, catastrophe ensued, and the Jews had to endure the exile and diaspora, but found their way closer to God. Out of that Judaism, the world was given Jesus.

In similar manner our country was originally just a bunch of independent colonies under the King of England. Somehow they pulled together and cooperated, thanks to leaders like George Washington and many others. But after independence, a loose association, the “Confederation,” failed. It wasn’t powerful enough. A new constitution with a more powerful Presidency was created. Through various crises afterwards the central government has become ever more powerful, and its responsibilities have widened. Like the Pharaoh of the Joseph story, responsibility for everything, food even, became the responsibility of Pharaoh, and the people became his slaves. We have the Food Stamps program, all sorts of Federal agencies to regulate agriculture, water distribution, and much else that wasn’t imagined in Pharaoh’s time. Is this what it necessarily takes to govern people in the modern world? Is there still room for an element of freedom? Complicated issues. They were complicated in Joseph’s time too.

Notice that, after interpreting Pharaoh’s dream, the first thing Joseph argues for is competent administration: 41:33 **“Now therefore let Pharaoh select a man discreet and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt. ... “**

When I read this, I can’t help but think, “Wait a minute. Isn’t that Pharaoh’s job? Isn’t he the king so that he can govern?” Maybe not. Pharaoh was supposed to be a god. Not necessarily an administrator. He had people for that. For this particular crisis, Joseph may be telling him that he needs a new position in his cabinet, and a new agency to administer the Pharaoh’s agriculture policy. And the engineers to build storehouses, tax agents, and all those other positions needed to make the program happen. Joseph was specific enough in his advice, even suggesting the 20% tax rate, to get himself chosen for the position. (Apparently 10%, a “tithing”, was the more usual taxation rate.)

Joseph was still, really, a slave. But now, even as slave to Pharaoh, he has authority above anyone other than Pharaoh himself. You may recall that much later Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon gave names to his newly acquired slaves Daniel and Shadrach, Meshack and Obednegu, captured at Jerusalem. In like manner, Pharaoh also renames Joseph, and marries him to the daughter of the Priest of On, as suitable for Pharaoh’s number one servant. On is the city Heliopolis (its Greek name), about seven miles north of the capital Thebes, the center of worship of the Sun god Re.

I can’t help but think, “That means Joseph’s household is a mixed marriage. He’s an Israelite who worships The LORD, and she’s the daughter of the high priest

of the Sun God Re! Why, that's going to make some interesting dinner table conversations!"

But that is a modern viewpoint. We think of God as the one and only god. That's the modern monotheism understanding. If we give credence to other religions, it's usually under assumptions that they are talking about our one God, perhaps with some misunderstandings about Him, but to the extent that's not true they worship false gods. For example, we consider Allah, the God of the Muslims, as being the same as our God.

During the time of the Patriarchs, the world knew only the pagan belief that there were many gods, some for particular peoples, some for particular places, and others for aspects of nature, like the Sun god Re. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob worshiped The LORD, but that didn't necessarily mean they thought other gods of their neighbors didn't exist. Even so, they seemed to understand The LORD as being a special, exceptional, superior God. Maybe the only God, but certainly their God.

You may recall that Rachel stole the "family gods" when Jacob fled from Laban. She was sitting on them to hide them when Laban was searching her tent. Not exactly a respectful position to put your gods in. (31:19, 30-35)

The LORD was "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." He was a very powerful God, and proved to be present with them wherever they went, even in Egypt, which was presumably the territory of the Egyptian gods. And, later, he was there with them in Babylon. So, could they not also worship the god, or gods, of the Egyptians? It wasn't until Moses and the Ten Commandments that God told them to worship him alone. Even after that, for hundreds of years, the Israelites had problems with this idea that they should worship only the one God.

However we might think about Joseph's specific policies as Pharaoh's deputy, there can be no question that he did his part by being faithful to God in the bad times, somehow continuing to be faithful in his times of tribulation. Without that, he would not have been in position to be an instrument by which his family, and perhaps even Egypt, could be saved. Maybe God would have acted through another, had Joseph perished as an unknown rebellious slave protesting God's unfairness. God will not be defeated. We can't know how; what we have is as it is written. We can pray that God can use us as he will, in small ways or big, as He may choose. Our part is to live in faith and do what we find God leading us to do.

Prayer: Faithful God, guide us and strengthen us as we seek to be faithful to you. Help us to make your way our way and thereby bring glory to you by the manner in which we live our daily lives. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.