

God's Working Through Joseph

The story of Joseph which occupies the last fourteen chapters of Genesis (37-50) takes place about 1,700 years BC. Although it is more than 3,500 years since Joseph walked upon the earth, some physical signs of his influence in Egypt still remain. For instance, the town of Medinet-el-Faiyum, situated 128 kilometres (eighty miles) south of Cairo is surrounded by lush gardens, thanks to an ancient waterway called Bahr Yusuf. Bahr Yusuf roughly translates from Arabic as 'the waterway of Joseph'. It is known by this name throughout Egypt and it is claimed that it was the Joseph of the Bible who planned it.¹ Furthermore, there are some ancient grain storehouses not far from the Valley of the Kings which date back to the period of Joseph, and the local Egyptians credit their building to Joseph.

Joseph commanded his relatives to take his bones back to Canaan when God released the people from Egypt. This request was faithfully carried out. Regarding the final resting place for his remains, one historian says,

"For centuries there was a tomb at Shechem revered as the tomb of Joseph. A few years ago the tomb was opened. It was found to contain a body mummified according to the Egyptian custom, and in the tomb, among other things, was a sword of the kind worn by Egyptian officials."²

The story of Joseph is an example of faithfulness in the face of adversity. It is also an example of forgiveness. In this case, toward brothers who had greatly wronged him. The narrative is particularly important because of the clear way in which it bears witness to Jesus Christ. Before showing how it bears witness to Christ, it will be helpful to outline briefly the main points which are as follows:

The name Joseph means, "may He (God) add sons". Joseph was despised by his brothers because he was loved by his father Jacob (later renamed Israel) more than any of his brothers. The Bible says, "Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him." (Gen. 37:3-4).

The richly ornamented robe was a sign that the financially beneficial birthright which customarily went to the firstborn son would go to the wearer of the robe. Ruben, who was the firstborn son (Gen. 29:32, 46:8), forfeited the birthright because of sexual immorality (35:22).

In addition to tensions which were exacerbated by the robe he wore, he was hated because of his dreams that he would become ruler, and his family would bow down to him, including his father and mother (37:10).

The Bible says, "Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. He said to them, 'Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it.' His brothers said to him, 'Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?' And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said. Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers.

'Listen,' he said, 'I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.' When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, 'What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?' His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.'" (Genesis 37:6-11).

Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver (37:28). Joseph's father is convinced that Joseph is dead after his brothers bring to him Joseph's cloak which they had dipped into the blood of a goat (37:33). The Ishmaelites took Joseph to Egypt and sold him to Potiphar an officer of Pharaoh (39:1).

Joseph was a very capable, faithful and trusted slave to the extent that he was put in charge of everything Potiphar had (39:4). However, Joseph loses his place of prominence after he is tempted by Potiphar's wife to commit adultery with her. Joseph refused her advances, so she falsely accused him of attempted rape (39:9, 17). He is declared to be guilty of the accusation and is thrown into prison.

All of these events are no doubt very trying to Joseph, but he remains faithful to God, and God prospers him, even in his new prison environment (39:23). While in prison, Joseph correctly interprets the dreams of two men, one was a cup-bearer to the king, the other was a baker. In fulfilment of the dreams, the cup-bearer is restored to his prominent position, and the baker is executed (40:1-23).

Pharaoh has a dream in which he sees seven fat cows get eaten by seven thin cows. Soon afterwards, he has another dream in which he sees seven ears of good healthy grain eaten by seven ears which are thin (41:1-7). In those days, troublesome dreams were seen as a message from the gods, so Pharaoh summoned the magicians and wise men of Egypt to interpret the dreams for him. When they are unsuccessful, the cup-bearer remembers that Joseph had correctly interpreted his dream and the dream of the baker.

Joseph is summoned to appear before Pharaoh and interpret his dream. He tells Pharaoh that the dreams refer to a coming prosperous seven years, to be followed by seven years of severe drought. He then advises that grain be stored during the seven prosperous years and that a wise man be chosen to oversee the whole operation. Joseph is chosen to be the overseer. He is given great power so that none is greater in power in Egypt except Pharaoh (Gen. 41:1-46).

All of the earth comes to Joseph to buy grain because the drought is severe over all the earth (41:57). Joseph's family is not exempt from the hardship, so they are also forced to go to Egypt to buy grain from him (42:1-3). The brothers of Joseph are forced to come humbly to him to buy the grain. Eventually Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and there is a very emotional reunion.

Joseph has the power to put his brothers to death. They are concerned about the possibility of revenge because of their ill-treatment of him during his youth, but instead of exacting revenge, Joseph forgives and shows kindness towards his brothers. He says, "And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was

to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.” (Gen. 45:5). They are told to leave their homeland and they are settled with Israel their father in the best region of the land of Egypt (45:18).

A small part of the story is taken up with a list of the names of the descendants of Israel (Jacob) who go down to Egypt (Gen. 46:8-27). This may make boring reading, but it is important because the detail helps to authenticate the story as being true. That which is not true can not be substantiated in this way. The total number of the house of Jacob that came into Egypt was seventy (46:27).

It is interesting to note that Joseph bought all of the land of Egypt for Pharaoh, and all of the people sold themselves to become slaves of Pharaoh (47:20-25). They willingly became slaves of Pharaoh because Joseph had saved their lives (47:25). It will become evident that this is an important point as we will see below how this incident bears witness to Jesus Christ along with other similarities mentioned below:

JOSEPH

1. His miraculous birth (Genesis 30:22-24).
2. He is loved by his father (Gen. 37:3).
3. Was despised by his brothers (Gen. 37:4).
4. Joseph is faithful under temptation (Gen. 39:6-8).
5. He is betrayed for twenty shekels of silver (Gen. 37:28).
6. Though he is faithful, Joseph was falsely accused and delivered up to prison (Gen. 39:16-20).
7. Joseph suffered in his imprisonment with two others (Gen. 40:1-23).
8. His brothers had planned his death (Gen. 37:20).
9. The brothers convince their father that Joseph is dead (Gen. 37:31-35).
10. Joseph is raised to a place of honour. “...ruler of all Egypt..” (Gen. 45:26). See also 41:41-44.
11. Joseph is the saviour of the world, selling grain to all who come to him (Gen. 41:45).
12. Those who had rejected Joseph now bow with their faces to the ground before him (42:6, 43:28).
13. Joseph recognised that he was delivered into the hands of Gentiles by the hand of God, and that God made him ruler over Egypt (Gen. 45:8).
14. “Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt...” (41:46).
15. Joseph reigned with the power of a king, and delivered all of Egypt into the power of Pharaoh (Gen. 47:20-21).

JESUS

1. The birth of Jesus was miraculous (Matt. 1:20-23).
2. He is greatly loved by his heavenly Father (Matt. 3:17).
3. He is despised by his own people (John 1:11).
4. Jesus was faithful to the Father (Heb. 3:3-6, Matt. 4:8-11).
5. He was betrayed for thirty pieces of silver (Matt. 26:14-16).
6. Jesus was falsely accused (Matt. 26:59-61).
7. Jesus suffered on the cross with two criminals (Luke 23:32-43).
8. His own people delivered him up to death (Matt. 27:19-23).
9. Jesus died on the cross (Matt. 27:50, Col. 2:22).
10. Though Israel rejected Christ, God has raised him to a place of high honour (Acts 2:36, Eph. 1:20-22).
11. Jesus is the saviour of all who come to him (John 3:16, Acts 4:12, John 14:6).
12. All of mankind will bow the knee to Jesus (Phil. 2:10-11).
13. Jesus was delivered into the hands of Godless men to die on the cross under the predetermined plan of God (Acts 2:22-24).
14. Jesus was thirty years old when he began his public ministry (Luke 2:23).
15. Regarding Jesus, “For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.” (1 Cor. 15:25).

16. Pharaoh settles Joseph and his relatives in the best part of the land (Gen. 47:5-6).

Out of all the above similarities, there are a few things which should be highlighted.

The Two Prisoners

While Joseph was in prison, two important prisoners were placed in his care. Both of these men had dreams through which God revealed to Joseph that one of the men would be released to a place of joy and happiness after three days, while the other faced the judgment of Pharaoh with the loss of his life, also after three days. Both predictions were fulfilled (Gen. 40:1-23). Jesus also suffered with two criminals, one of whom knew a release to joy in paradise in the presence of Christ. His salvation was secured with the resurrection of Christ after three days. The other criminal who reviled Christ met with judgment (Luke 23:39-43). That judgment being secured with the resurrection of Christ, who, as the judge of all the earth, rose after three days (John 5:22, Acts 10:42).

Exalted by God

Joseph was despised by his brothers, they initially wanted to put him to death. They finally decided to rid themselves of Joseph by selling him into slavery. However, the very means by which the brothers were bringing Joseph down to a place of humiliation and shame, God was using to bring him to a place of great honour. It was through his being in prison that he was brought into the presence of Pharaoh and subsequently lifted to the place of great honour.

We see the same situation in the life of Jesus. He was despised by his own people, "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." (John 1:11). The authorities decided to put him to death, however, it was by this very means; his death, that God determined to raise him to a place of honour. The apostle Peter said, "...let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." (Acts 2:36). See also Acts 4:11, Eph. 1:20-23, Col. 1:19-20, Heb. 1:1-13.

Saviour of the World

It is interesting to note that Joseph became the saviour of the world. The whole of the known world was under a severe drought (41:57). It was through Joseph that God determined to bring salvation. All who came to Joseph could buy food and live. The Egyptians in gratitude said, "You have saved our lives,... May we find favour in the eyes of our lord; we will be in bondage to Pharaoh." (Gen. 47:25).

The world today is in great need. The need is greater than that for physical food, the need is for spiritual life. The only person God has sent into the world to save sinners, and give spiritual life, is Jesus Christ. It is interesting to note that just as Joseph was raised up from a place of shame to become a saviour, so also, Jesus has been raised up from the place of shame on the cross to become the saviour of his people. "...to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." (John 1:12).

16. A beautiful dwelling place is prepared for all who come to know Christ as their saviour (Rev. 21:3, John 14:2-3).

Kingdom Builder

Joseph built up a kingdom for Pharaoh, he delivered all of the land and all of the people of Egypt into the hand of Pharaoh. "...Joseph bought all the land in Egypt for Pharaoh. The Egyptians, one and all, sold their fields, because the famine was too severe for them. The land became Pharaoh's, and Joseph reduced the people to servitude, from one end of Egypt to the other." (Gen. 47:20-21). Just as Joseph brought the people under the rule of Pharaoh, so too, Jesus during his reign in this present age brings people under the rule of God the Father.

In a reference to the reign of Christ in this present age and the resurrection to come we read, "...in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands the kingdom over to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death." (1 Cor. 15:22-26). We further read, "When he [Jesus] has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him [God] who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all." (1 Cor. 15:28). (Brackets added for clarification).

After the humble experience of Joseph, everyone except Pharaoh had to bow in obedience to him. The bible says of Jesus, "And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:8-11).

End Notes

1. W. Keller, "*The Bible as History*", Bantam Books, New York, 1980, p. 89. See also: www.wikipedia.org/wicki/Bahr_Yusuf
2. Josh McDowell, "*Christianity: A Ready Defence*", Here's Life Publishers, San Bernardino, 1991, p. 102.

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