

# Joseph

## Gifts used by the Gifted

Like Abraham and Jacob, Joseph is a narrative about more than it seems. It is clearly not a scientific biography of an actual historical personage or what really happened or even what might have happened. It is also something more than an unusually good historical novelette tacked onto the end of the book of Genesis. So what is this story about?

It is indeed a novelette that references historical realities, and it is “holy scripture” in the following way: Joseph is the seed of Abraham. He is the character in a fictional story about the essence of giving back all your gifts to the Giver. His story is a narrative about the nature and role of the People of God. He is (hold your credulity for this) the true church, the Body of Christ, the Word of God, the communication of the Almighty operating in an imaginary view of a historical moment.

So what are the details? Joseph is the 11th of 12 sons of Jacob. He is the most gifted of the twelve. His father adores and favors him. His younger brother looks up to him. His oldest brother is proud of him and protects him from the envy and jealousy of the other 9 brothers. He is the first son of Jacob’s favorite wife Rachel.

In this story the envy-afflicted brothers find an opportunity to kill him, but the eldest brother scales that down to throwing him into a pit. The eldest brother intends to come back and rescue him. But before he can return to do that, some greedy scoundrels come by and sell him into slavery.

His owner is soon impressed with him, for Joseph uses his gifts to become a very good slave. Even the owner’s wife falls for him and gets him in trouble with her husband who then puts him in jail.

In jail he makes friends with a servant of the Pharaoh of all of Egypt. That man has a disturbing dream which Joseph, with this vast sensitivities, interprets so helpfully that when the Pharaoh has a disturbing dream, this servant tells the Pharaoh about Joseph, who is then called before Pharaoh to interpret his dream.

Pharaoh’s dream is about cows, but Joseph sees in it a sociological meaning for Pharaoh’s responsibility. There will be eight years of plenty followed by eight years of famine in that whole Mediterranean corner. This sensible Pharaoh sees that he must launch an emergency program of saving grain during the period of abundance for the coming lean period, and he puts Joseph to work on that project.. Joseph is so good at

everything he does, that he is appointed head person in the administration of this project.

At the end of the eight years of plenty, Joseph's father and brothers who are living back in Palestine come into severe want. So Jacob sends his elder 10 sons to Egypt to buy and bring home a large supply of grain. He keeps his twelfth son home because he does not want to lose Rachel's second son, like he lost Joseph. This is where the story takes on the high points of the novelist's art. Joseph is the one who is negotiating with his brothers for the grain. They do not realize that this Egyptian executive is their brother, and Joseph does not tell them yet. He forces them to bring their younger brother Benjamin back with them for their next trip. Then, he keeps Benjamin as a hostage to force bringing back their aging father Jacob, who is also called Israel. With the whole family of patriarchs there, he then reveals himself, works through a reconciliation, forgives his guilty brothers, explaining that "what they meant for evil, God meant for good."

The whole clan is then moved to Egypt where Joseph can support them. Their descendants prosper until there came into the Egyptian leadership an administration that "knew not Joseph."

This brief retelling of the story is perhaps enough to make a few general comments about the Joseph character. He is a portrait of the nature of the presence of the people-of-God. He is a story about a personage who is giving his gifts back to the Giver, and is he doing so with competence in whatever situation that the Giver is giving to Joseph—a situation of favoritism, mistreatment, slavery, prison, opportunity, success, responsibility, estrangement, reunion, emotional intensity, whatever.

Here is a second generalization dramatized by this character Joseph: Being the people of God does not only mean a solitary state of being; it also means a sociological responsibility. In fact, being the people of God is a key dynamic in making truly progressive steps in world history, as well as such steps in personal lives.

Laying down your life and all your gifts in whatever situation you are facing is the life style that defines who are the people of God. The Gospel portraits of Jesus provide companion stories to this old portrait of Joseph. Jesus' "revelation" shows us that "unto death" can mean unto death in a most grueling fashion. At the same time, Jesus' intentional dying became a pathway toward the birth of a whole new family of radicals who manifested Jesus' same full manner of detachment and engagements on behalf of all humankind and the planet—doing so with all their gifts in the situations being given to them.

To those of us who allow ourselves to hear these stories deeply, they call to us to be the Joseph/Jesus people of God—of the God Yahweh, of the Profound Reality of the whole cosmos.