

Retelling the Biblical Story: Joseph

Joseph's story tells of God working redemption in the midst of our human freedom. It is the story of the Providence of God, not as some fixed plan but as God's saving interaction with our human best and worst.

In the course of the story we see the full range of human passions: political intrigue, sibling rivalry, love, hate, jealousy, lust, ambition, heroism and mercy.

Joseph is the hero of the story, but the major actor is God who is at work through all the turns and twists of the plot. Joseph points to this truth at the end of the story. His brothers are cowering before him fearful that with father Jacob's death, Joseph will take revenge on his brothers for selling him into slavery. And what does Joseph say?

Do not be afraid. Who am I to be in God's place? *No, you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.*

Or, in Everett Fox's new translation:

You planned ill against me, but God planned-it-over for good.

We have a planning-it-over for good kind of God.

I

The story begins with Joseph at seventeen. He was the son of Rachel, Jacob's beloved, apple of his father's eye. What terrible irony. Jacob himself was passed over, his own father Isaac preferring Esau to him, but now he plays favorites with his son Joseph. The text says painfully: "Jacob loved Joseph more than all the children."

How much like us: despite our protests and promises to the contrary we repeat the mistakes of our parents. Unless some new awareness breaks through.

Joseph was the favored son of his father. He knew it, he loved it and he flaunted it. Jacob gave him a coat of many colors, and Joseph wore it like a neon sign that read: “Father loves me best!” Spoiled, he craved attention; a dandy, he fancied the way he looked.

His brothers hated him, and we can understand.

One day Joseph went to his brothers and said, “Listen to my latest dream. We were gathering wheat in the field when suddenly my bundle of wheat stood up, and all your bundles circled mine and bowed down to it.” His brothers didn’t have to be Sigmund Freud to get the point: “What?! You wish to reign over us?”

Undaunted he told them a second dream—this one ever more preposterous: “I saw the sun, moon and eleven stars prostrate before me.” This was too much—even for doting father Jacob. “What?!” he said, “Are you like God so that your parents and your brothers bow down to you?” Because of the dreams his brothers hated him even more.

They began a plot to kill him. One day father Jacob sent Joseph to Shechem to meet his brothers. Had he not seen how his favoritism had caused the other sons to turn against him? Why did he not foresee what was to happen? Questions like these would haunt him. Later his sorrow and self-recrimination would nearly kill him.

When Joseph met his brother they jumped him. They tore off his coat of many colors and threw him into a pit. While they were discussing what to do with him, a passing caravan came by. Brother Judah interceded and convinced his brothers not to kill him but to sell him into

slavery. They did. For twenty pieces of silver. *They meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.* They planned evil against him but God was planning-it-over for good.

Then the brothers returned to their father with a lie. They dipped Joseph's coat of many colors into a goat's blood and took it to Jacob. Jacob jumped to the conclusion the brothers intended: "A wild beast has killed my son!"

Again, terrible irony. He who had deceived his own father Isaac, dressing up like his brother Esau, is now deceived by his own sons. The guilt and grief would nearly destroy him. He cried out, "I will wear my mourning clothes until I die." And he nearly did.

II

Joseph meanwhile, went down to Egypt as a slave. The text says, "And the Lord was with him", as the Lord is always with the oppressed, the poor, weak and vulnerable, those with their "backs against the wall."

From his unlikely beginnings as a slave Joseph achieved a stunning success, first as an interpreter of dreams, then as a statesman. The King's right hand man. Joseph the cat always seemed to land on his feet.

He became the trusted servant of a man named Potiphar. Being an extraordinarily handsome young man—"he was fair of form and fair to look at". (Gen. 39:6)—he attracted women, and they brought temptation.

Madame Potiphar, wife of Joseph's master, fell in love with her young servant. A story from the rabbinic commentary, the Talmud, goes like this. One day some high society ladies came for lunch, Madame Potiphar served citrus fruits with knives to cut the fruit. In walked

Joseph. So bedazzled were they that they went into a state of shock and cut their hands with their knives. Madame Potipher breathlessly moaned: “This is what I must endure day after day, hour after hour.”

The next verses read like a soap opera. Potipher’s wife fell head over bucket in love with her young servant- she made many overtures to him. Repeatedly he refused her advances. (That point is quite unlike a soap opera.)

Then one day when the house was empty, save the two of them, Madame Potipher moved aggressively to win him. She tore off his outer garment. Joseph ran away in a panic leaving his cloak in her hands. It was evidence enough.

She called others in, showed them his coat and said, using the word “Hebrew” like a racial slur, “This *Hebrew* tried to lie with me.”

She meant it for evil but God meant it for good. She planned ill against him but God was planning-it-over for good.

It was his very *Hebrewness* that gave him the moral and spiritual strength to resist the temptations to betray his master and sleep with his wife. Madame Potipher humiliated by his rejection took revenge by accusing him of her own sin. For Joseph this meant back to jail.

III

Joseph in jail, and again the text says, “And the Lord was with him.” He became friends with the jailers. Soon he was the administrator of the jail. Have you known people like that? Joseph the cat had again landed on his feet.

He grew famous as an interpreter of dreams, which led to his interpretation of the Pharaoh's dream of the seven fat cows and the seven skinny cows.

Joseph interpreted the dream: The seven fat cows are for seven years of extraordinary plenty. We are living in those years, Joseph said. The seven skinny cows are seven years of famine which we are now approaching. "You had better get prepared", said Joseph. Store up grain for the seven years of drought.

"You've got a job", said Pharaoh. And that's how Joseph became the Pharaoh's right hand man, prince, chief bureaucrat. Because of Joseph's shrewd administration Egypt was prepared for the famine—not only surviving themselves but becoming a caretaker of neighboring nations.

This is the way God uses the nations God blesses: to care for the weak and vulnerable in its midst and beyond its borders. May America be such a nation today. Blessed nations who refuse to be a blessing subvert God's plan.

IV

The predicted famine brings an unexpected twist in the story. Joseph's brothers who sold him into slavery come to Egypt begging grain. Canaan was in famine. When the brothers bowed before the prince of Egypt they did not recognize him, he now grown up and decked in royal robes. But Joseph recognized *them*. Had he forgiven them? When they came and bowed before him the scriptures say that he remembered the dreams which he had dreamed of them. Remember? Their stalks of wheat bowing down to his stalk? We get no glimpse of how he remembered the dreams. But as we shall see mercy won out over revenge.

He did not tell them who he was but sent them back to Canaan with grain on the condition that they return to Egypt with youngest brother Benjamin. This they did.

Then as he sent them back home a second time with grain he planted in Benjamin's saddle bags a silver cup. He then sent his soldiers to confiscate the cup and bring them back to Egypt for punishment. The sentence: Benjamin, youngest son of Jacob, had to stay in Egypt and become his servant.

Brother Judah who had intervened to save Joseph's life earlier, intervened again. He said, "My father has already lost one son named Joseph. If he were to lose Benjamin too, it would finish him off for good."

Moved by Judah's compassion, Joseph could conceal his identity no longer. He wept aloud. "I am Joseph your brother whom you sold into slavery."

Upon this disclosure the brothers were terrified. Would not Joseph now wreak revenge? Instead Joseph showed he had conquered vengefulness and bitterness, and he forgave them. He called for a family reunion and had father Jacob brought to Egypt.

His response to their fear was remarkable. His vision transcended family, tribe, nation. It took in the universal, overreaching Providence of God. Listen to his words:

Do not be pained that you sold me here. For it was to save life that God sent me on before. God sent me here to save the lives of many, even your lives, to keep you alive as a great body of survivors. (Genesis 45:7) So do not waste yourself in grief. Go get Father Jacob and bring him here.

And so they did.

V

His brothers would be afraid once more: when father Jacob died. Joseph had promised his father that he would do his brothers no harm. But now with father Jacob dead, would Joseph keep his promise?

His brother came trembling before him and said, “Please forgive us the evil that we did to you.” When Joseph heard them he wept and said, “Do not be afraid. For am I in the place of God?” (We smile. That’s how he thought of himself as a young man with the dream of the sun, moon and eleven stars bowing down to him.) But he had been driven deep by life, by God and had become a man of wisdom and mercy.

He said to them: do not be afraid. *For am I in the place of God? You meant it for evil but God meant it for good.*

VI

The story plumbs the depths of the question of the Providence of God, of how God works in the midst of human freedom to say yes and no to God to achieve the good.

So here are some questions for us, questions that go to the heart of things.

Can we believe that God can take evil and turn it into good?

Can we believe that God can take the evil to us and turn it into good?

Can we believe that God can take the evil we have done and turn it into good?

Can we believe these things with our lives so they make a difference in our lives?

What if God is a planning-it-over kind of God who takes our broken plans and plans them over for good.

Paul thought so. “For we know”, he wrote, that in everything [the good and the bad, the best of times and the worst of times] God works for good with those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose.” He had the cross and resurrection in mind.

What kind of God is it who can take our crucifying of this only son and turn it into our salvation?

It’s the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac Jacob and Joseph, of Moses and Ruth, David and Esther, Mary and Jesus, that’s who.

We say it bravely. We say it sometimes without seeing it, for “we walk by faith not by sight.” We say it some days when life has knocked the breath out of us. But we say it.

They meant it for evil

I meant it for evil

but grace upon grace

God planned-it-over for good.