

Joseph in Egypt
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Slavery for Joseph was God's witness protection plan! God had to get him out of the hands/reach of his envious brothers because in their wickedness, they wanted to kill him. Psalm 73:3 declares, **I was envious of the wicked when I saw the prosperity of the wicked . . . until I went into the sanctuary of God . . . then I perceived their end.** That is a warning as well as a serious indictment for those given to envy. People like Jacob, whose besetting sin was envy—the “loveless and dark, passionate selfishness of his children (Joseph's brothers)” sprang from his loins, was engendered in their home life because Jacob was envious! He was envious of Esau, Isaac's favorite son, and he wanted his father's favor/blessing so badly he was willing to steal it. Now that is a side of “fatherlessness” that we seldom examine when we discuss children without fathers in our day. Jacob hated the favoritism Isaac showed Esau and yet, learning nothing from the adverse effects of that favoritism, proceeded to take it to a whole new level. Jacob had a favorite wife—something that monogamy settles because one's only wife is by default your favorite one(!) Polygamy is an arrangement that spawns envy, favoritism—*misery and strife*. Jacob's household was contentious and miserable because of envy. In fact it was so miserable and difficult that it would take the Lord generations to root out the envy, **and attendant other dark passions** (like lust, greed, wildness and violence) and restore godliness to that home. Joseph was safer in Egypt, he was out of harm's way—hidden, in a witness protection plan. Ironically, what God had to do to effect remediation was to liberate Joseph from his dysfunctional family. God had to take over “fathering” Joseph because Jacob was unfit as a parental unit.

Scripture warns us against envy in many places. Proverbs 3:31 commands, **Do not be envious of the man of violence and do not choose an of his ways.** That is precisely what baffled Jacob about Simeon and Levi's reaction to the rape of Dinah. He didn't realize the roots of violence in envy. We should take note of that. Then in Psalm 73:1, we are directed, **Do not fret because of evil-doers, do not be envious of wrongdoers.** This being so, one could render, in paraphrase, **I was envious** as the bald statement, **I was in sin**—which frank admission drives one to consider repentance. What does one do when beset with envy? Repent of it immediately. Do not let it fester, or metastasize into plotting and planning evil! Proverbs 23:17 also addressed envy: **Let not your heart envy sinners (the wicked) rather continue in the fear of the Lord.** It was by continuing in the fear of the Lord that Joseph was able to elude the lustful snare posed by Potiphar's wife. As you may recall, Joseph said, **How could I do this great wickedness and sin against God? That is continuing in the fear of the Lord!** Joseph doesn't sin against Potiphar, or Potiphar's wife *because of his focus on not sinning against God*. Now the fall-out from Joseph's righteous refusal to commit adultery is “prison time.” In refusing to sin with the woman, he effectively shamed her because right next door to “How could I?” is “How could you join me in this sin?” That had a dampening effect on the whole business of illicit sex! So, shamed by his stand, she probably experienced, after bewilderment (who refuses sex?!) emotions like exposure

and conviction because adultery is actually quite ugly, unattractive, when looked in the face. At the very least she faced rejection and all of that negativity fueled her hatred of Joseph; she would destroy him if she could. She started with his sterling reputation as trustworthy. It was pure revenge.

So the Psalmist found solace by going into the sanctuary—he found remedy for his envy there, in the presence of God his passions were reordered. Fortunately, we are not limited to physical location in this matter! God’s presence can come to us; he can draw near and the effect is the same. We discern the end of the wicked, we see them before the Judgment seat where inequalities and injustices are all reviewed, and resolved. The wicked are punished in the end; they end up in torment as befits their practice of evil. The injustice apparent now is dissolved finally, there and then. And, pity is more fitting than envy because of how things turn out.

Now when I first preached on the incident with Potiphar’s wife, I was unaware of that Thomas Mann wrote a 650 page psychological novel, Joseph in Egypt, putatively exploring Genesis 39! *It was so immense a work that it had to be published in two volumes—it was a challenge to hold it, let alone read this enormous tome.* I think that no one present has read Mann’s novel. So, what might we learn from this work of speculative exposition—for that is indirectly what it is!—fictionalized exposition? A novel approach?

Then it hit me, this novel marks a huge cultural shift. Here is what I mean: Mann’s treatment of Genesis 39 in a novel, signifies a shift from pulpit sourced information about the bible, to, say, publishing house source for public, theological/biblical discourse. There is a new avenue for thoughtful engagement (or entertainment), in a bookish culture, where reading displaces listening—and private reflection supplants congregational engagement. Reading is a means of self-education, a means of access, through books rather than sermons, prefigures our day of cell-phones, texting and internet access! No one has to go somewhere to hear someone when you can ask Siri, or download a MP4 of one’s preferred “speaker/preacher” from anywhere, anytime that fits one’s schedule.

I would submit that bible study is qualitatively different in the wake of these shifting modes of information transfer. And, when one reads aloud, one hears oneself and no one else—outside of radio drama where various readers are recorded—this is a seismic shift in how we learn.

Material that might have been presented in a sermon series is now placed in the hands of the individual reader (an act of privatization!) and *the personal reading experience* of the literate man replaces the corporate experience of worshipping Christians¹. The novel may attain a depth of perspective which could not be achieved in

¹ The checks and balances of a confessing community, promoting orthodoxy and right belief, is stripped away and, as a result, the training/expertise of the reader (biblically, theologically) becomes enormously more critical. As MLJ opined, Are people believing the rights things righty.

the limits of a sermon event—consequently, the individual is left to consider, on his own the creative, imaginative work of Thomas Mann. BUT the novel is not Scripture; it is a work of fiction. Mann explores, by way of projection, from the psychological perspective, what he supposes Joseph went through: “a great soul shaping crisis” ((in psychological terms!)) during which Joseph struggles with his own love life (no evidence for that in scripture!) . . . his desire to be helpful (a servant indeed—plenty of evidence) . . . and devotion to his family-based religious ideals (a modern conception). This is a very strange concept, “family-based religious ideals,” especially if family is taken in the usual biological sense! Joseph’s problem, apparently, is one of socialization and of adaptation (again, psychological issues like mental adjustment and acculturation show up—intrude themselves) into the narrative of Mann, the modern writer. And these are very *modern themes* framing **a very old narrative oddly** (biblically speaking). There is precious little in the text to support Mann’s “great, soul-shaping crisis;” or the psychological dynamics upon which his novel is founded. It rather like a movie, all man-made and all made up.

Let’s take up Mann’s postulation of “family-based religious ideals.” We might put it this way but should immediately remember that Joseph is fourth generation of the elect, counting from Abraham. He is part of the divine plan for twelve tribes first to form themselves into clans, through tribes on their way to becoming the nation of Israel, God’s Chosen People. *This biblical truth is irreducible to psychological terms!* It is so early in the process that calling Joseph’s faith “an expression of a conventional religion” is premature. Man’s relationship to God is still in its formative stages—God has made himself known, sacrifices and sin offerings are part of the picture (the practice of animal sacrifice extends back to Eden). However, there is no record of Joseph offering any such sacrifices—the last sacrifice mentioned, I think, was performed by his father Jacob in Bethel—so, apart from dietary restrictions (where those came from we are not told), there is very little to support the idea religion (or of religious ethnicity—Jewishness) in the narrative. As a result, Mann’s “family-based religious ideals” is a thin construction, probably originating in Mann’s notions about “religion” even the word “ideals” points us in that direction—his view is definitely sociological/psychological not biblical.

Well, is there a “a great soul shaping crisis” at all in the Joseph cycle? In the text, we might observe a real conflict between Joseph, the successful man, and Joseph, the slave (because **the Lord was with him**, v.2) which resulted from his finding favor with Potiphar. There is also a relationship of mutual trust between the two men and this falls under the heading of the larger picture: Joseph’s trust in God (faith?) *which trust is held to be inviolate*. I mean, that the danger of breaking trust with God may rise to something of the “soul shaping crisis” standard of Mann.

The seductive intentions of Potiphar’s wife is a clear and present danger to trust on both levels—but are note soul shaping. However, Joseph’s faith priority is never in dispute: **How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?** That frames the crisis in Joseph’s own terms, not based on considerations (psychological) imported to the text! I suppose that it is legitimate to explore the psychological dimensions of the

adultery plot, speculatively, but not at the expense of the **great wickedness/ sin against God** piece which is textually foundational and brings its own dynamics..

It is fascinating that Joseph doesn't agonize over sinning against his master, his master's wife, or even himself—his primary concern is *theological* not psychological!

Thomas Mann also presupposes that Joseph has a love life. Doesn't everyone? This universal psychological need (self-actualization? identity? need for relationships?) is then, being presupposed, imported into the text. It's extraneous. Indeed, it is most conspicuous by its absence. Scripture is notably discreet. Later we learn that Joseph is given a wife—but the romantic details are absent. Perhaps that discretion is more in keeping with arranged marriage among Egyptian nobility. Asenath, his wife, bears him two sons and these sons are assimilated into the family (filling in for Levi, and for Joseph himself/his double portion).

There is just not much to support the twentieth century style, Western marriage in the text! In fact, the very idea is outlandish.

I also learned, from my research, that the Hebrew word translated "officer" (38:36 and 39:1) is literally the word for an "eunuch." This puts the sexual motivations of his wife in an entirely different light. If she was looking for a progeny, it would have to be someone other than her husband. That softens the charge of sexual aggressor somewhat and may help explain why there was no condemnation of her recorded—in fact Mann expands this into a court scene wherein Joseph magnanimously refuses to accuse her of any wrong-doing. Again, that touch is a matter of authorial liberty; it is not born out by scripture. It is a fact that Joseph acts grandly, magnanimously in his career, towards his cruel brothers and towards the hungry world that he saves from extinction—and that should be sufficient evidence of spiritual maturity, of growth in personhood and manhood, do not require the addendum of any love interest. Joseph's refusal to defend himself against her false accusation is inferred from a silence in the text and that is, of course, suspect.

Mann's intention is to show how an insufferably conceited youth (Is that how we biblically read Joseph's youthful exuberance over his dream stuff?) is matured "through the hot fires of a hot and cruel world" (self-actualization), how his "soul's ambitions develop from"parentally favored selfish arrogance to an effective leadership ability that can save the world." An amazingly "messianic" interpretation of Joseph's role in preserving the world—*not saving the world, a very humanistic aspiration!*

Mann acknowledges the real role of suffering in Joseph's story but forces it into the psychological mode. Joseph is an inveterate leader, born to lead, born to become the "man of the hour." So we aren't surprised to read at the conclusion of Gen. 39 that now, in prison, he rises again to a position of leadership (first among his brothers, then in Potiphar's house, and now, in prison) he emerges as a leader because **the Lord was with him**. (v.23) This last point, God's presence with him, is my theological insight—I

am not sure that Thomas Mann attributes the same weight to God's presence as does the Scripture.

We can adduce from scripture two huge, shockingly unimaginable betrayals in Joseph's life (traumatic events/PTSD anyone?): the first motivated by the jealous violence of his own brothers (and their open rejection of godly governance!) and the second, arising from the twisted passions of Potiphar's wife (apparently the avenue of surrogacy was not open to her in that day?). These "shaping" events—are certainly apt for peaking reader interest, creating tension and conflict—they also prepare the way for even more *disillusionment* (a specifically twentieth century mood), when the cupbearer, rescued by Joseph (if the dreams interpretation is embraced as hopeful in that way), simply moves on with his life, does nothing. He forgets all about Joseph, a pathetically common human experience. It seems that from Dothan (where he was sold into slavery) to the royal prison, Joseph has been on a downward skid—thirteen years in duration. The challenge then would be: keeping the faith, maintaining one's trust in God—that is a more biblical premise than what Thomas Mann proposes.

How does one engineer a "personal transformation plan" that alters a man from a self-absorbed youth into a great, and selfless leader? That's the question. Of course, the world we have governed by the God we have seems to work fairly well at character formation in the faith-based life. Maybe what we need is some focused, increased prayer that faith would increase and grace abound in the lives around us.

We urgently need to familiarize ourselves with the Lord's "methodology" in this matter. It doesn't come from education, or intellectual development, or reading a good novel, *rather it comes from providential suffering and divine presence*. Those "cultural" things do not help anyone move through and past revenge—past avenging oneself for the wrongs committed against oneself.

The challenge of a faithful life is that of obtaining one's genuine identity, fulfilling one's spiritual calling—which consists of hearing from God and of doing what God tells us to do. In a family-based culture, identity is a corporate matter (not a private one); one's family is a major part of who one is. Obedience, on another tack, is the goal of the life of faith. The two do not necessarily align easily. The gap between Mann's world and 1400 BC is simply too large to bridge easily—so, in the end, it isn't.

Amen.