

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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JOSEPH'S JOB

by James B. Jordan

The Bible teaches us that while the rulers among the pagans love to lord it over their subjects, Christians achieve power through service (Mark 10:42-45). Indeed, in the vision of Zechariah 1:18-21, the four horns which rule the world through force and terror are overcome and replaced by four craftsmen who achieve dominion through labor and service. Power flows to those who accept responsibility, and there is no finer illustration of this principle and its effects than the history of Joseph (Genesis 37-50).

The first appearance of Joseph in the Bible is as a righteous judge, the right-hand man of his father (37:2, 3). Like his father Jacob, Joseph was a man of books and ledgers, not a "macho man" of the hunt like his uncle Esau. Because Joseph was honest and shrewd, his father invested him with the authority to evaluate the activities of his brethren and bring home a report on them (37:2, 14).

Because of his faithful service, Joseph's father made for him a splendid vestment. Placing it on Joseph, Jacob invested his son with his own authority. From that day on, Joseph was second only to Jacob in the house. When his envious brothers attacked Joseph, the first thing they did was tear off his garment of glory and authority (37:3, 23). Such is the power of envy that they sought to kill him, and were only kept from it with difficulty (37:21-28).

Service for Potiphar

Joseph was sold to a household in Egypt. The first phase of his service was in the house of Potiphar (39:1-7). Joseph did not see his enslavement as a cause for resentment or bitterness. He is not seen throwing spanners into the works, or sand into the machinery. Rather, he served dutifully and well. As a result, the lazy Potiphar gladly entrusted more and more of the household responsibilities to Joseph. Soon, it was really Joseph who was in charge, and Potiphar "did not concern himself with anything except the food which he ate" (v.6). Potiphar had the name of master, but he had a slave mentality and lived as a slave, a slave of food. Joseph had the name of slave, but he was a dominion man, and he ruled in life. The point was not lost on the wife of Potiphar; she knew who the real power in the house was.

Like the camp followers of all ages, the wife of Potiphar tried to make it with the man of power, but Joseph's job was not to serve Potiphar but to serve the Lord (39:7-12). The fact that Joseph was stripped of his robe by the wife of Potiphar is symbolic of his loss of power in Potiphar's house because of her actions. At this point in the story, it appears that the benefits Joseph was gaining from faithful service are compromised by his virtuous adherence to the law of God. The story is not over yet, however.

From Prison to Power

The vengeance of the wife of Potiphar landed Joseph in prison. There again, however, he ruled in life (39:20-23). Because of his responsible and effective service to those in charge, Joseph was soon put over the entire prison. He had the name of prisoner, but he was exercising dominion. From that position, he could do much good. By being a slave *par excellence*, Joseph acquired mastery (Mark 10:43).

From prison Joseph was elevated to Pharaoh's right hand. The narrative of Joseph's prison experiences in Gen. 40 shows the means whereby he was enabled to rule in the midst of enslavement: He understood and applied the Word of God, which came to him in the form of dreams, and to us in the form of Holy Scripture. Because he understood God's principles whereby He rules the world, and because he was able to apply them accurately to the situation in which he found himself, Joseph proved of inestimable value to every master who employed him. In time he was exalted to second in command over all Egypt (41:40f.). Again he was invested with authority, this time with the robe of Pharaoh (v.42). As Joseph later put it, he came to be a father to Pharaoh (45:8)—in other words, the power behind the throne. Pharaoh made no decisions without consulting Joseph. From this position of authority, Joseph was able to feed the entire world (41:57).

There are lessons here for oppressed Christians, wherever in the world they may be. It is all too easy to yield to the sinful temptation to obstruct the designs of heathen masters by half-hearted obedience or active meddling. The story of Joseph tells us that the road to victory, dominion, mastery, is through service, the humble service of a slave. Through service and suffering, God purges and destroys indwelling sin in the believer, builds character in him, and fits him for the mastery of the world. As the lazy wicked see that they can trust the hard-working righteous to keep the machinery running, they will tend to turn it over to them.

Enslaving the Slavers, Part 1

It is a fitting reward for those who unjustly sell others into slavery that they themselves be enslaved. Joseph threw his brothers into prison (42:17), and their thoughts turned, as those of the guilty often do, to the preeminent wrong they had committed years before (42:21f.). Fear of judgment in general brought their specific guilt to mind. By refusing to accept their money, Joseph put them in his debt; this increased their worry, for they knew that the debtor is slave to the lender (Prov. 22:7). Finally, Joseph arranged for them to "steal" his divination cup. The brothers, believing themselves innocent, vowed to become slaves if found guilty, and the actual thief would be put to death (44:9). The penalty for theft, however, is not death

out enslavement (Ex. 22:3), and so Joseph required the enslavement of the guilty party only (Gen. 44:17). Judah begged to be enslaved in Benjamin's stead, demonstrating the attitude Joseph had looked for all along (v.33). Upon this disclosure, Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and in giving them changes of garments (45:22), he elevated them to dominical offices of some sort (again, through investiture).

An unexplained curiosity in the text is the notice given to Joseph's silver cup as a supposed cup of divination (44:5) and Joseph's hint that he practised divination (v.15). Divination is a demonic practice, forbidden to the children of God (Lev. 19:26; Num. 23:23). Clearly, Joseph did not, in fact, practise divination. The cup is initially referred to simply as "my cup, the silver cup" (Gen. 44:2). Joseph told his steward to claim that it was a cup of divination, and Joseph also makes this pretense. Why? Because divination was part of the Egyptian occultist-demonic religion, and the covenant people were looking to Egypt (and her gods) rather than to the Lord for food. Instead of looking for deliverance to their God, the Lord, they were looking to an apparently heathen Egyptian vizier. In the crisis, their thoughts did not turn to the Lord for help, but to the statist power which overshadowed their land. Thus, Joseph asks them, "Do you not know that such a man as I can indeed practice divination?" That is, did you not realize that a person in my position would certainly be a diviner in a culture such as Egypt? Joseph's action was a dramatic parable designed to show them that if they looked to Egypt for salvation, they were looking to Egypt's gods as well; and if they looked to Egypt for salvation, they would become slaves of Egypt. This is according to the Biblical principle that the one who eaves is the one who rules (Jud. 8:22; Luke 1:71, 74, 75; Ex. 20:2 ff.). What rescued them from bondage to Egypt at this point was the fact that Joseph was, in fact and contrary to appearances, not an Egyptian but a covenant worshipper of the true God.

Joseph's brothers had sought freedom from their father's control, but found nothing but enslavement to a strange ruler in an alien land. Joseph had sought for opportunities to serve wholeheartedly and faithfully, and he found power and dominion.

Enslaving the Slavers, Part 2

The prosperity of God's people, restored in type to the garden of Eden, is consequent upon the work of Joseph, and it is in this warm glow that the book of Genesis comes to an end. Egypt is specifically compared to the garden on Eden in Gen. 13:10, and Goshen was the best part of Egypt (47:6). The text states (42:27) that "Israel lived in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen, and they acquired property in it" (garden restoration) "and were fruitful and multiplied" (same terms as in Gen. 1:28).

By way of contrast, the heathen Egyptians were decapitalized (47:17), lost their land (v.20), and finally were reduced to abject slavery (vv.23, 25). Slaves by nature, they became slaves in very fact. Joseph and his kin were the rulers of Egypt; the Egyptians were slaves of Pharaoh. Pharaoh, being a false god, exacted a double tithe from his slaves (v.24). Joseph's involvement in a scheme to reduce a nation of people to slavery to a false god seems problematic, but three things need to be kept in mind. First, the scheme came from God, not from Joseph (Gen. 41). Second, sinful man is appropriately bound under slavery to the state. God's principle is that men should experience slavery to their gods, and if they will not have Him as their God, He gives them into the hands of whatever god they choose. Pharaoh was the god of Egypt, and his priests were his extensions. God gave the Egyptians into Pharaoh's hands. Third, the reduction of the heathen Egyptians to slavery was a blessing for the saints—initially.

The fact that Pharaoh was not himself enslaved points to the provisional character of this victory of the saints. The victory of Joseph over the Egyptians is eschatologically typical, and therefore eschatologically provisional. Its provisional character is dramatically brought home in the first chapter of Exodus, where the centralized state Joseph helped create is turned against God's people.

Should Christians in the New Covenant imitate Joseph's service in this particular, enslaving unbelievers to the state? The present writer believes not, for three reasons. First, Joseph's work in this respect seems to be analogous to the annihilation of the Canaanites by Israel; that is, it was a special judgment of God against a particular people effected by God's people on the basis of special revelation. In the New Covenant, there is no singling out of certain races or peoples which are to be put to death or reduced to the shadow-death of slavery to the state. Second, as has just been intimated, deliberate reduction to slavery is a killing action, since slavery is a sphere of death. New Covenant believers do not engage in holy war by the sword (as opposed to just wars), and Joseph's action should be seen as a species of holy war. Third, with the crushing of Satan's head and the smashing of the world-imperial administration of the world, there is no longer any reason for the kingdom of God to exempt the Pharaohs of history from the demand for submission. Rather, what is expected is that the kings of the earth will receive God's rule, and that statism will decline and disappear (Micah 4:1-5; Is. 60:3).

Joseph's job was to conquer the world, restoring the garden of Eden and subduing the wicked. The means to this end were faithful service to God, and to human authorities. The same is true for us today. Not every Christian is called to preach (Isaiah's job), but every Christian is called to Joseph's job.

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