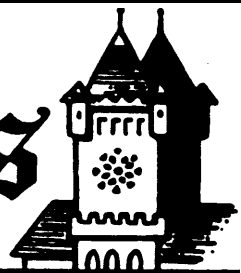


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## JOSEPH'S ENSLAVEMENT OF THE EGYPTIANS: FAIR OR FOUL?

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In Genesis 47 we have the account of Joseph's reduction of the populace of Egypt to slavery. This passage has been a source of consternation for Christian thinkers throughout the ages. Was this sinful on Joseph's part? After all, nobody should ever be reduced to slavery, should he? Or should we say that the Egyptians, being heathen, deserved to be made slaves, and it was proper for Joseph to enslave them? This has been a more common explanation in recent years. The purpose of this essay is to explore the area afresh, and offer a third and hopefully more satisfying explanation.

### The Conversion of Egypt

A missing link in the interpretation of Genesis 47, and one which only makes the passage harder for us to understand, is the conversion of Egypt. This conversion is apparent when we consider the book of Genesis as a whole. When God called Abram, He told him that He would bless those who blessed Abram, and curse those who cursed him, and that "in you all the families of the ground shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:2-3). This established that Abram would function as a priest to the nations. We see this right away, in that when Pharaoh attacked Abram and his household, God cursed him (Gen. 12:10-20).

The remainder of the history of Abraham establishes this even more fully. One of Abraham's sons, Isaac, would continue the seed/priestly line. His other sons, Ishmael and the sons of Keturah, while believers and blessed by God, would not be special priests, but would live "downstream from Eden" (see Gen. 21:20; 25:1-6; and 25:18 with 2:11). For instance, the Godly Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, was one of Abraham's descendants. We also see Abraham acting as priest to the nations in Genesis 20:7, 21:22, and perhaps 23:6. In each case, those who blessed Abraham, and converted to the God of Abraham by making covenant with him, were blessed, while those who cursed Abraham were cursed.

This theme continues through the histories of Isaac (Gen. 26) and Jacob (Gen. 31), and reaches its climax in the history of Joseph. Like Isaac and Jacob, Joseph was a miracle child, born of a formerly barren womb on the other side of the wombs "resurrection" (Gen. 30:22-24). Like Abel, Seth, Shem (Gen. 10:21),

Isaac, and Jacob, Joseph was "second" born, and thus could prefigure the second Adam who replaces and redeems the older brother (the first Adam). Joseph did indeed replace his older brothers in pre-eminence, and he also redeemed them from their sin and death by providing for them in famine.

The theme of the nations blessing Abraham's people and Abraham's God is seen throughout the Joseph story. In Genesis 41, we read how God invaded the quiet, predictable world of the Pharaoh with a dream. The goal of Egyptian civilization was total control and predictability. They wanted an unchanging, eternal culture, signified by the vast and perfectly orderly pyramid structure. The Sovereign Lord of history totally destroyed Pharaoh's composure by giving him a dream which showed that history was completely out of Pharaoh's control. Pharaoh suddenly realized the inadequacy of his religion and world-view.

When Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream, he was giving Pharaoh the Word of God. Had Pharaoh not converted, he would certainly have rejected the Word of God. Pharaoh might have said, "Who is this idiot Hebrew? Get him out of my sight." Instead, however, Pharaoh acknowledged the Spirit of God in Joseph (despite the way modern Bibles mistranslate Genesis 41:38). Pharaoh submitted to the Word of God, and honored Joseph by putting him in charge of everything. Because Pharaoh blessed Joseph, God blessed him and his kingdom.

There is absolutely no justification for importing into the text some modern notion of Pharaoh merely bowing to reality, but not really converting. The whole thrust of the book of Genesis is to show the principle of blessing that comes when the nations convert and serve the Lord. Everything in the book points to the fact that this is happening here. It is only because we are not used to thinking that Egypt ever had a period, however brief, of true faith, that this seems strange to us. The Joseph who fled from Potiphar's wife would surely not have married an idolatrous woman, so we may be sure that Asenath, and probably her family, were also converted (Gen. 41:45).

Repeatedly, we see that Pharaoh and his household (staff) were emotionally pleased and happy at the good things which happened to Joseph: There was genuine affection for the house of Abraham, again an

indication of true conversion. For instance, in Genesis 45:16, "Now when the news was heard in Pharaoh's house that Joseph's brothers had come, it was good in the eyes of Pharaoh and his servants? Pharaoh immediately took steps to give the best of Egypt's land to Joseph's family (Gen. 45:17-20). Moreover, when Jacob was brought before Pharaoh, Jacob blessed Pharaoh (Gen. 47:7, 10). This is in strict fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, but no such blessing would have been given to an unbeliever, an enemy of the Lord. Finally, we can see the strong bonds of covenant fellowship between the converted Egyptians and the house of Abraham in the way the Egyptians mourned the death of Jacob (Gen. 50:7ff.)

Two things emerge from this discussion which shed direct light on how we are to understand Joseph's reduction of Egypt to slavery. First, Egypt was at that time a converted people (as Nineveh became under Jonah later on). This makes the problem worse, it seems, because now we have to say that Joseph reduced fellow believers to bondage!

Second, Jacob's blessing of Pharaoh must provide a canon governing our interpretation of the rest of Genesis 47. Joseph's reduction of the Egyptians to slavery was a blessing for them, by implication part of the blessing Jacob bestowed on Pharaoh. Indeed, the Egyptians rejoiced at their enslavement, as we shall see.

### Freedom and Security

To understand this, we need to discuss the problem of freedom and security. Modern thinkers tend to pit these against each other. This is most commonly seen in the political arena, where the contest is between the security of socialism and the freedom of libertarianism. As Christians, however, we need to avoid being pulled into taking sides on such an issue. In fact, security and freedom go together, and there cannot be one without the other.

Both security and freedom are vague concepts; but we have a general idea of what they mean, and generally speaking freedom and security go hand in hand, and are not opposed to one another. For instance, if a man has no zone(s) of security in his life, and thus is totally "free," he in fact will not feel free at all. Instead, he will feel tremendous tension, a debilitating stress which will shorten his life, break his health, stifle his creativity, and prevent him from accomplishing what he might. This "freedom" is hardly worth celebrating.

On the other hand, if a man lives in a totalitarian society, where he has no areas of freedom at all, he will not in fact feel secure. Rather, he will feel threatened by the very monolithic state which claims to give him security. This also will result in tension, loss of creativity, and so forth. This is hardly a "security" worth the name.

True security is the foundation of freedom. In modern Japan, for instance, the security provided by the large family corporations frees the employees from tension, and releases their creativity. There are zones of freedom, and zones of security. This is the beauty of any *feudal* system, and this is why Christianity has generally created some type of feudalism

wherever it goes. (For a good discussion of feudalism, see R. J. Rushdoony, *This Dependent Republic*.)

Christianity puts the security factor primarily in the Church, and secondarily in the family. It is the everlasting arms of the Triune God which provide our final security, and it is the womb of Mother Church which provides our fullest experience of this security in this present world. To a lesser degree, the family provides security, especially for the child. The family, however, is not a permanent institution but a transient one (Gen. 2:24), so it cannot provide long-term ongoing stability. The civil authority also provides some stability, in securing us from harm at the hands of criminals and invaders. This, however, is more of a negative than a positive security.

The Church provides, thus, the great psychological retreat for the psyche battered and bruised by sin, the world, the flesh, and the devil. The sabbath-security provided by the Church gives men a foundation for the freedom of action they manifest in the world.

The arena of the marketplace is the primary area of freedom. The purpose of money and wealth is not primarily to provide security, and when men come to trust in mammon for security, they move into idolatry. Rather, money and wealth provide freedom for action, for expansion, for dominion. It is only in a secondary way that money provides security, and the security provided is seldom psychologically effective. Many wealthy people are extremely insecure; indeed, they often seem to have more fears and worries than men much less well off. Thus, money is not very valuable as security (a buried talent), but is primarily valuable for expansion and work (the talent put to work—Matthew 25:14-30).

Modern pagan existentialist man perverts, and actually reverses, the zones of security and freedom. They want the state to become the womb of society, providing security and comfort for men. They want religion and the faith, and the institutional Church, to be an area of freedom, of angst. The modernist rejects the "security" of an infallible Bible, or of a "cozy" Church. Thus, he effectively despises God's offer of comfort.

Young Christians frequently do not understand how important is the zone of security and comfort provided by the institutional Church. As we grow older, and life becomes more complicated, more distressing, and more grievous, the Motherhood of the Church becomes more important to us. Thus, as the Church matures over time, she does become more institutionalized, and provides more and more avenues of comfort and security for her members—as well she should.

Now, we could keep talking about security and freedom for a long time, but we have said enough hopefully to establish the point that these two are not in competition. And this is an important point, because *Biblically speaking, slavery is not necessarily the opposite of freedom*. To take one example, if a man was sold into slavery briefly to pay off a debt, he might come to find more true freedom under the gracious care of a loving master than he had enjoyed while out in the world. Thus, he might ask to be adopted into the family of the master, by having his

ear bored to the doorpost of the house.

Ultimately, the Source of all freedom and security is God, and thus the two cannot be in conflict. The more fully in covenant with God we are, the more free we are, and the more secure we are. As the Church has always taught, slavery to God is the greatest freedom.

Freedom and security are not abstractions, but relations and experiences. When people are rightly related to God, they experience both true freedom and true security. People may experience a false freedom and a false security apart from God, but always freedom and security are things *experienced*. They are psychological conditions, not abstractions. Thus, if a serf in the Middle Ages "felt" free under the protection of his lord, who are we to say he was not "really" free? It is important to understand this, because it implies that freedom and security are both highly relative matters, relative to various conditions of life.

The Egyptians did not perceive Joseph as an enslaver, but as a liberator. Their final statement to him was, "You have saved our lives! Let us find favor in the sight of my lord, and we will be Pharaoh's slaves" (Gen. 47:25). Even though they had been "enslaved," they did not feel that they were slaves. Rather, they felt *delivered* from the far more gruesome bondage of famine and death.

Biblically speaking, men cannot be absolutely free. They are always in bondage to someone: God or else the enemies of God. Men in bondage to God are truly free. Men in bondage to other men, or in bondage to sin and the fear of death, are not free. The question, then, is whether enslavement to Pharaoh was a good or a bad thing.

The answer should be obvious. If Pharaoh was converted, and represented God to his people, then bondage to Pharaoh was a species of the liberating bondage of humanity to God. The people were delivered from the horrible bondage of famine and death, the judgment/result of their years of pagan apostasy, and delivered into the hands of a Christian ruler.

Looked at that way, this seems a positive thing, and so it was for that people at that time. We still need to ask, however, whether this sets some pattern for the modern world.

### Stages of History

To answer that question, we need to understand several other factors in the text. After all, if this was just some immediate deliverance, a manifestation of salvation, why did Joseph bind the people to a permanent payment of 20% to Pharaoh (Gen. 47:26)? This seems a permanent reduction in status. Maybe not, however. The following observations are pertinent.

First, the Bible teaches that the human race was created to grow through stages, like the stages of growth of the human individual. Thus, the entire period of the Old Covenant, from creation to Pentecost, is said to be a time of childhood (Gal. 4:1-3). During this time, humanity (including the Jews) was in "bondage" to the "elementary things" (earlier principles) of creation. This "bondage" was a good thing, "for the elementary things acted as guardians and tutors to humanity in its infancy (Gal. 4:1-11). Under the New Covenant, men should not go back under this bond-

age, but under the Old Covenant this kind of bondage - was itself a liberating thing.

Thus, there are degrees of liberty. For the Egyptians, to move from bondage to famine into bondage to Pharaoh was a positive step forward. For us to move from our Christian liberty into bondage to the state, however, would be a step backward. History is progressive.

Second, we don't know what kind of situation the Egyptians were in before Joseph enslaved them to Pharaoh. They had to pay 20% to Pharaoh thereafter, but possibly this was an improvement over what they had been paying to local lords. The passage does not tell us, but the thrust of the passage is liberation. We may assume some improvement actually took place.

Third, when Pharaoh asked Jacob to bless him, and when he gave the land of Goshen (the best land) to Abraham's children, Pharaoh was submitting to God. The 20% tithe was not paid, thus, to a purely statist power. A part of that tithe went to the upkeep of the priests of Egypt (also temporarily converted, we may assume), and to the benefit of the priestly nation of Abraham. Possibly, then, we should see the 20% as 10% for the king, and 10% for God. At the very least, however, we need to see that the ultimate Ruler of Egypt was God Himself, and the ultimate beneficiary of the new tax system was the Church (the priestly nation).

Fourth, another possibility is that the 20% tax involved double restitution. The normal tithe would be 10%, but Egypt had been in a period of rebellion and apostasy. Genesis 12 shows this, in the story of Pharaoh's attempted rape of Abram's sister. Egyptian apostasy was so well known that it took a special vision from God to persuade Jacob that it was all right to go there (Gen. 46:1-7). Thus, instead of paying a tithe to Pharaoh as head of the Egyptian priestly religious system, the people would pay 20% as double restitution for stealing from God all those years. Pharaoh, as head of the Egyptian Church (priest/king of a converted nation) would support the priestly nation (Israel) while it lived in his land.

Fifth, the fact that all the land became Pharaoh's, which he then leased out to the people, also sounds horrible to us. In the Old Covenant, however, this seems to have been a normal procedure. In Israel, God as King owned all the land, and parcelled it out, establishing regulations for it (cf. e.g., Leviticus 25). Among the nations, there does not seem to have been any problem with recognizing the king of the nation as God's viceroy in some sense (cf. e.g., Daniel 2:37; 4:25, 32). The pattern of a king's holding the land and leasing it to the people seems to be part of the "elementary things," seen in Israel as God's owning the land, and among the nations as the land owned the king as God's viceroy. This, of course, is not a pattern for us in the New Covenant.

### Conclusion

This essay has been a "theodicy," a defense of the ways of God to men. We might look at Genesis 47 this way: Pharaoh and Joseph conspired to use the famine as a means of extracting all the capital of Egypt and as a way to reduce the entire population to slav-

ery to a tyrannical state. Such an interpretation, however, goes against every nuance in the text, and turns Joseph basically into a criminal. In this essay, we have been concerned to defend Joseph's action.

What actually happened was this. God brought about the famine as a means of bringing the Egyptian nation to its knees. God converted Pharaoh and the Egyptians. God liberated the Egyptians from bondage, and brought them under the rule of a Christian prince, guided by the Church. No longer were the Egyptians in psychological bondage to false gods and a static view of history. No longer were they subject to the famine. Now they were free to cultivate the land that God, through Pharaoh and Joseph, gave back to them, provided they gave a double tithe of its produce. We have suggested a couple of possible reasons for the double tithe.

Of course, in time Egypt apostatized. She repeated the fall of man, and when that happened the situation became bad once again. In fact, it became

worse, because of the maturation of humanity (maturation in evil, this time). The power of Egypt, built up by the faith and by the work of Joseph, was turned against God and His people. But that's another story, and as the book of Genesis closes, all seems well. The fall is in Exodus 1. The book of Genesis ends with a picture of the conversion of the world, a microcosm of the history God has designed for humanity as a whole.

Under the Old Covenant, what Genesis 47 describes is a liberation, not an enslavement. It was a step forward. It is not, however, a pattern for us to follow today, except in a most general kind of way. The procedures and patterns brought to bear on the situation were part of the "elementary things" of the world, and they have been replaced by the more glorious liberty of the New Covenant. Christ is now our "Pharaoh," our Emperor and Head of the Church, and He requires only a simple 10% of us.

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