

Trinity College Cambridge
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God and Israel
Israel in Egypt: Joseph

Genesis 47: 13–25

Luke 22: 24–27

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Nearly all of us have pet hates. For some having to sit on a train listening to someone else's loud (and really rather tedious) conversation on a mobile phone. Others will be vexed by a misplaced apostrophe, such as in a sign on a stall in the market saying "Fresh Fenland Lettuces' "; – or in my case, and I will admit that it is a bit particular, woeful misuses of the bible. Indeed, if I had my way, there would be a Bible Crimes tribunal sitting at the Hague, and amongst the first up would be Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, the composer and librettist of the musical 'Joseph and his Technicolour Dreamcoat'.

According to Wikipedia, this musical is 'based on the coat of many colours story of Joseph from the Bible's book of Genesis' – 'based on' in the way that, for example, certain hotels in Las Vegas are based on Versailles. To prepare a full indictment would take too long, so let me focus on the chief charge, which has to do with that song from that musical which goes under the title 'Any Dream Will Do', a seemingly sweet and charming sentiment, made the more so presumably when sung by such famous leads in the role of Joseph as Donny Osmond, David Cassidy, Jason Donovan and Stephen Gately. For my colleagues amongst the Fellows, I should explain that these gentlemen are popular actors and singers, who appear quite regularly on the television – a medium combining pictures and sound, which is quite widely viewed in homes throughout the UK. The song to which I refer tells us that 'any dream will do' – when the whole point of the Joseph story, I believe, if we will attend to it, is just that any dream will not do.

We all remember that Joseph, his father Jacob's youngest and favourite son, dreamed a dream. 'Behold', he tells his brothers, 'we were binding sheaves in a field, and lo, my sheaf arose and stood upright; and behold, your sheaves gathered round it, and bowed down to my sheaf.' And then he dreamed a yet more astonishing and outrageous dream: 'Behold, I have dreamed another dream; and behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.'

Well, according to Messrs Lloyd Webber and Rice, 'Any Dream will Do' – but according to the story, on which this musical is loosely based, 'His father [Jacob] rebuked him and said unto him – what is this dream that thou hast dreamed?' And his brothers, who already 'hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him', now 'hated him yet more for his dreams and his words.' I doubt that Jacob and his sons had read Freud, but then they didn't need to have read Freud to find these dreams troubling, or even menacing. Here is a seventeen-

year-old boy imagining himself at the very centre of the universe, receiving the homage of his brothers and his parents, and even the sun, moon and stars. It is all a bit creepy.

Again, we know the story – the brothers reckon to kill Joseph, but then, at the last minute, in a failure of resolve, they sell him into slavery. He is taken to Egypt, where, after various vicissitudes, his ability as an interpreter of dreams brings him to the attention of Pharaoh, who has himself been dreaming dreams of fat and thin cattle and of ears of corn heavy with grain, and of others, thin and blighted. Offering Pharaoh an interpretation of this dream – seven years of plenty will be followed by seven of famine – he also offers him a policy for staving off the disaster the famine threatens – ‘Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land, and take the fifth part of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven plenteous years ... That food shall be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine which are to befall the land of Egypt’. And, since he has warned of impending disaster and offered a cunning plan to avert it, Joseph is unsurprisingly put in charge of its implementation and invited to share in Pharaoh’s absolute power:

Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph’s hand, and arrayed him in garments of fine linen, and put a gold chain upon his neck; and he made him to ride in his second chariot; and they cried before him, ‘Bow the knee!’ Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt.

The plan for world domination is going swimmingly – and some years later achieves what we surely must think of as its main purpose when, in the midst of the famine, Joseph’s brothers come down to Egypt from the stricken land of Canaan in search of grain, and find themselves before this unknown potentate, ‘to whom they bowed their heads and did obeisance’. For this, of course, is what he was really after – a bit of respect from his older brothers.

Well, now – ‘Any Dream Will Do’ was what was troubling me. And I hear counsel for the defence saying the following. For all the suspicions which Joseph’s father and brothers and we might originally have entertained about this young boy and his dreams – suspicions about a youngest brother who cannot bear his last place (however favoured he might be) and dreams not only of being his brothers’ equal, but rather ruler over them and his father – was not his rise to power fortuitous? As Joseph says to his brothers – ‘God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God.’ Joseph’s exaltation, then, is not a function of any human purpose, suspicious or otherwise, but rather, so he alleges, a result of the will of God, who in a providential fashion overrules and subverts merely human intentions for the sake of a larger benevolent purpose. Far from Joseph being a desperate megalomaniac set on world domination (all for the sake of getting back at his brothers), he was merely, so he insists, God’s servant in a compassionate project of famine relief. If not Jason Donovan then Bob Geldof with a dash of Bill Gates.

It is a good try, but if you attend to the details, Joseph’s spin on the story doesn’t quite convince. It is not that the interpretation Joseph offers is plain false – the narrative certainly tells us that the famine relief scheme works. But as the story unfolds, the manner in which the scheme works manifests the sinister side of our dreamer and his will to power.

Notice how this scheme works. During the years of plenty, Pharaoh takes, so we read, a fifth of the produce from the producers and stores it against the bad years. But when the bad years come, ‘when the famine had spread over all the land, Joseph opened all the storehouses, and sold to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe in the land of Egypt.’ Now that is a clever trick to begin with – what had been taken from the farmers is now sold back to them. But there is more to come. The famine worsened: ‘there was no food in all the land’ – and Joseph makes the most of it; he ‘gathered up all the money that was found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, for the grain which they bought; and Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh’s house.’ So with plenty of donated grain still left in the storehouses, Joseph now possesses all of Egypt’s money, having sold back to the people what they had given.

The people of the land are now quite desperate, understandably – with all the money spent and in Pharaoh’s pocket they come to Joseph, and say “‘Give us food; why should we die before your eyes? For our money is gone.’” Joseph will have none of this ‘give us food’ malarkey. ‘Give your cattle’ he says, ‘and I will give you food ... if your money is gone.’ A year later, when they have relinquished their ‘horses, ... flocks, ... [and] herds’, the people return to Joseph. And now we sense they are getting the hang of how things work round here – there is none of that soppy ‘we are starving, give us food’ stuff – instead they propose a deal with this hard-bitten negotiator. “‘Buy us and our land for food, and we with our land will be slaves to Pharaoh’”. And so it was: ‘Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh; for all the Egyptians sold their fields, because the famine was severe upon them. The land became Pharaoh’s; and as for the people, he made slaves of them from one end of Egypt to the other.’ So cleverly has this scheme been managed, that the people actually end up grateful for their abject oppression: “‘You have saved our lives; may it please my lord, we will be slaves to Pharaoh.’” – which is about the same as all of us getting together to write a big thank you letter to the banks for what they have done to ensure prosperity and well-being throughout Europe since the recent financial crash.

However this winning dreamer has worked his magic on the people of Israel, Israel’s God is plainly not so impressed – for God, so we know, will finally settle the history of Israel, quite apart from Joseph. Joseph imagines he stands at the centre: above brothers, father, and the whole of Egypt – above even the stars, sun and moon in the more plainly pathological and absurd fantasy. All Egypt makes obeisance before the one announced by Pharaoh’s servants with the cry, ‘bow the knee!’ But for all that, he has no part in the central thread of Israel’s story – which will continue not through his line, but through Jacob’s fourth son, Judah. Joseph’s pre-eminence is temporary and transient – and in the end, history passes him by. He would like to believe that his story is central and dominating narrative. But he does not belong to the story of Israel in the way that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Judah do. His dreams are really in the end just dreams – and bad dreams, at that, as his father first suspected. As one of Jacob’s sons, he himself is father to one of the tribes of Israel. But in the grander narrative of Israel’s story, he ends up having just a bit part.

His own less than glorious end is recorded in the very last verse of Genesis, a verse of supreme and incomparable bathos after this dizzying political career – ‘So Joseph died, being an hundred and ten years old: and they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.’ No mention of mourning. No mention of a grand funeral. None of the solemnity with which his father’s passing was marked. None of the grief which will accompany the death of Moses. He is simply and rather appropriately, embalmed, or mummified. He has gone native re: burial practices – and the result is symbolically telling. He went down to Egypt and bound its people, and eventually bound his own people Israel, in a harsh oppression from which the latter will only escape after the bitter sufferings against which, under Moses, they will rebel. So he ends confined in a coffin and tightly bound, head to foot, constrained in death by fetters even stricter than those he imposed on the living.

When Christ rebuked his disciples in that story we heard from Luke’s gospel, he was himself distinguishing good and bad dreams – no ‘any dream will do’ here. ‘The kings of the gentiles lord it over them ... But it shall not be so with you. Rather let the greatest be as the youngest, and he that is chief, as one who serves.’ Christ dreams a dream of greatness which inverts the normal practice of greatness and which imagines authority and power in the service of the lowly, not as an opportunity to take advantage of them – his dream is thus a sharp and decisive counter to the dream of Joseph.

Well, to return to where we began, someone might tell me that war crimes and crimes against the bible are not quite the same thing – and ‘Joseph and His Technicolour Dreamcoat’ is only a musical. Well, it is only a musical – but if Christians show some concern for the truthful telling of Bible stories, it is because here, in the narrative entrusted to us, we have a powerful tool which is meant to shape our minds and our hearts and our actions in particular ways. If we and the Church are to dream good and not bad dreams, to dream not of the oppression practiced and found in Egypt, but of a new order of authority and service realised in Christ, we need to keep these stories in their truth and critical power.

Of course, truth to tell, it has not always been the Church which has witnessed to the critical power of these stories – sometimes, as we know, the Church has itself lived out dreams of power and oppression, and the good dream has been kept alive on the fringes of official and established religion. In the nineteenth century, for example, the story of Israel in Egypt was perhaps most powerfully narrated and taken up by the slaves of the American south, who found themselves in the people oppressed in Egypt as a result of Joseph’s machinations, and took up Moses’ demand in the next generation, ‘Let my people go’. It was this story, the story of oppression and liberation which occupied and structured their imaginations and inspired their words and actions – up to and including those great and courageous witnesses of the 50s and 60s, such as, to take just one example, Rosa Parks, who, under the power of this narrative, quietly refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white person.

When we look at our world, fifty years on from those events, we can hardly fail to reflect that moral courage and incorruptibility of that kind have no less occasion for service now than they did then. Now and again, the world seems to get better. But Joseph's dream has a habit of recurring, and where it does, it tirelessly seeks to impose its own vision of political order. Whether in China or in Burma or in Russia or in Syria (I am going to stop the list there, because we don't have all day), the task of constraining the exercise of power so that it is not simply an opportunity for the few to exploit the many, is as challenging as ever – and to turn the exercise of power towards the service of a wider and common good, remains a distant dream. And before you think that this lets us off, who live under less benighted regimes, let us add immediately, that moral seriousness and courage and incorruptibility and vision will surely be required if as nations and individuals we are to find ways of supporting and sustaining those who seek liberation elsewhere, rather than merely being content to rub along with powerful trading partners who we would rather not challenge for fear that it would be bad for business and our comfortable lives.

Stories are never just stories, and dreams are never just dreams. There are good stories and bad stories; dark and ominous dreams of domination, and auspicious dreams of worlds renewed, redeemed and transformed. So not 'any dream will do' – only the dream which comes into our history hidden in the Genesis story, and revealed and proclaimed in Christ – this counter dream to dreams of the amassing of power and wealth, at whatever cost. We need to discover again, to rediscover, the critical power of these stories to inspire active witness in a world where tyranny and inequality and violence and lawlessness find ever new forms. So let us we return to this story truthfully, and may our own dreams and lives be ordered by it, and ordered aright.¹

¹ I have relied on two excellent commentaries on the Joseph story: F. Watson, *Text, Church and World* (Edinburgh, 1994) and L. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom* (Chicago, 2003).