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## Different Roles Played By Joseph In The Bible

Although Joseph is known for his coat of many colors, the true plurality of Joseph arises not from the appearance of his clothing, but from the multiplicity of roles that he assumes over the course of the biblical narrative. Joseph is both favored and hated, servant and master, Canaanite and Egyptian, naive and crafty, and, in the eyes of his father, both dead and alive. His story bears a strong resemblance to those of his forefathers, yet his relationship with God is profoundly different. Joseph, as the last of the patriarchs to be considered in Genesis, serves a unique function. Not only must he physically bring the Jews from Canaan to Egypt, but his story must symbolically bring the early, patriarchal relationship with God to a more contemporary level. Joseph's faith in God's plan ultimately leads him to success, despite the suffering he endures through much of the narrative. The tension between the traditional, patriarchal role and the role that Joseph eventually adopts is highlighted as his position as his father's favorite child pushes him away from his forefathers' roles as direct communicants with God, and toward becoming the father of only one of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Joseph's position as his father's favorite quickly lands him in trouble with his brothers. This familial struggle serves as an early indicator of the duality that arises from the conflict between Joseph's success and the actions of those who are meant to keep it from him. Joseph, because he is loved by his father "more than any of his other children" (book 37 chapter 3), suffers the consequence of intense wrath and jealousy at the hands of his father's other sons. Perhaps innocently, Joseph fans the flames of his brothers' hatred by embracing his elevated status. Joseph tells his brothers and father of his dream, in which representative images of his brothers "bowed down" (37, 3) before him. Demonstrating what can be interpreted as either naivete or mocking confidence in his father's favoritism, he proceeds to relate a second, similar dream, even though his description of the first has already caused his brothers to hate him "yet more" (37, 9). His dreams, however, eventually lead even his father to protest, when Joseph relates a dream in which even Jacob himself, represented as "the sun" (37, 9), bows down before him.

Joseph's feelings of superiority are expressed in a number of other arenas. Jacob's early favoritism immediately elevates his position. As Joseph further embraces his place as the presumed next in line to his father, he begins to separate himself from his brothers by ignoring his duties. He is the only one of Jacob's sons to remain at home while his brothers are out "pasturing the flock at She'chem" (37, 13). Jacob advances the divide between Joseph and his brothers by placing him in an overseer-like position. He tells Joseph to rejoin his brothers in their work so that Joseph may "bring him word" (37, 14) of his brothers' actions. Joseph sets out to join his brothers, but they overpower him and throw him into a pit, an action that reverses the elevated status of Joseph both physically and symbolically. Shortly after, he is picked up by a

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group of Midianite traders and eventually sold into slavery in Egypt, a fate that seems to contrast sharply with both his dreams and his earlier, master-like position over his brothers.

This rapid reversal of fortune and position becomes a pattern that is repeated through much of the narrative. Having reached Egypt, Joseph oscillates between opposing positions, becoming both slave and master, as well as prisoner and jailer. Joseph reaches Egypt as a slave and is sold to Potiphar, an officer of the Pharaoh, as a servant. In the house of Potiphar, he becomes immediately successful. Potiphar sees that "the Lord was with [Joseph] and that the Lord caused all he did to prosper in his hands" (39, 2). He elevates Joseph to the position of "overseer of his house and put[s] him in charge of all that he [owns]" (39, 4-5). Joseph gains increasing influence in Potiphar's house, eventually becoming as powerful as his master, who at this point has little concern for the affairs of the house other than "the food which he [eats]" (39, 6). However, the tides soon turn on Joseph. As Joseph assumes a role increasingly like that of master of the house, Potiphar's wife begins to make advances. Joseph refuses, but Potiphar's wife, distraught over Joseph's rejection, turns Joseph's goodness against him. She uses the garment Joseph left "in her hand" (39, 12) while fleeing her advances to incriminate him, telling the men of the household that Joseph came "to lie with [her]" (39, 14) and telling her husband that he came "to insult her" (39, 17). Like Joseph's brothers, who superficially elevate themselves above Joseph by throwing him in a pit, Potiphar's wife reestablishes her status by claiming that Joseph fled as soon as she "lifted up [her] voice" (39, 18). Potiphar, angered with Joseph, has the younger man sent to prison. Again, Joseph falls from what is essentially the highest rung of one environment to the very bottom of a new one.

Joseph's position over the course of his progression from Canaan, where he must deal with simple familial envy, to Egypt, where he is sold into slavery, to prison seems to grow progressively worse. However, Joseph manages to flourish despite the wrongs done to him. Even when he is thrown in prison, an event that arguably marks the lowest point of his journey, Joseph manages to rise to the top of his environment. Earning "favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison" (39, 21), Joseph is granted privileges and powers far beyond those of an ordinary prisoner. In an odd display of favoritism, the prison keeper commits "to Joseph's care all of the prisoners" (39, 22). He reaches a position of authority and power that parallels his ascension from servant to near master in the house of Potiphar, eventually becoming responsible for "anything that [is] done" (39, 22) in the prison. His influence causes him to be elevated to what is essentially the post of the prison keeper. When the Pharaoh's butler and baker are jailed for having offended the king, the "captain of the guard [charges] Joseph" with their care. Joseph, while still technically a prisoner, becomes the prison keeper.

Through his interactions with the Pharaoh's butler and the baker, Joseph manages to leave prison. He successfully interprets the meaning of the imprisoned servants' dreams. This ability serves to demonstrate how Joseph's success, although aided by God, is largely accomplished

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through his own cleverness. While dreams are biblically considered communications from God, Joseph has a unique talent at understanding them. This skill demonstrates both his close relationship with God and his cunning. After all he interprets "[comes] to pass" (41, 13), the impressed butler takes word of Joseph's skill back to the Pharaoh, who is troubled by dreams that "none [of his magicians and wise men] could interpret" (41, 8). The Pharaoh brings him from jail and asks him also to interpret his dreams. From the Pharaoh's dreams, Joseph divines that Egypt must prepare for seven years of famine and advises the Pharaoh to appoint a "discreet and wise" (41, 33) man to oversee Egypt in preparation for it. Perhaps as a clever means of advocating himself for the post, he then gives further advice external to any information that could have been gleaned directly from the dream. Joseph gives the Pharaoh an extensive, detailed plan to combat the famine:

Appoint overseers over the land, and take the fifth part of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven plenteous years. And let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming, and lay up grain under the authority of the Pharaoh for food in the cities, and let them keep it. That food shall be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine which are to befall the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish through the famine. (41, 34-36)

Joseph's success, though aided by the hand of God, is largely due to his intelligence. Impressed with Joseph and confident that God is with him "since God has shown [him] all this" (41, 39), the Pharaoh grants Joseph the position.

In his new position, Joseph is accorded an extraordinary degree of power. The immediate trust the Pharaoh places in Joseph follows a pattern repeated through much of the narrative. Joseph continually rises to the level of his superiors, often assuming much of their authority and position and almost replacing the roles of those he is supposed to serve. This is a theme that is found even in Canaan, when Joseph remains at home while his brothers shepherd. Similarly, in the house of Potiphar, he nearly surpasses his master, at one point acknowledging that Potiphar "is not greater in his house than [he is]" (39, 9). In his position as aide to the Pharaoh, Joseph rises from subjugate to master as the Pharaoh places him "over [his] house" (41, 40), directs his people to "order themselves as [Joseph] command[s]" (41, 40) and tells Joseph that "only as regards the throne" (41, 40) will he remain greater than Joseph.

In becoming "ruler over all the land of Egypt" (45, 26), Joseph demonstrates his ability to rise in status regardless of the hurdles placed before him. This success in the face of adversity is used to illustrate a more contemporary relationship with God, in which one can be favored in the eyes of God and simultaneously suffer. Joseph must work through numerous hardships, but because "the Lord [is] with Joseph" (39, 2), God "causes all that he [does] to prosper" (39, 4). Joseph's accomplishments show that suffering does not necessarily take the form of divine punishment. Rather, Joseph's struggles are part of God's plan. As Joseph explains to his brothers after they

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beg for forgiveness for having wronged him, "you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good" (50, 19-20). Joseph, in excusing his brothers' wrongs, demonstrates his belief that had they not occurred, the outcome of his life would be entirely different. He makes clear that it is only through the actions of his brothers was he brought to Egypt and thus able to rise to his ultimate position of power.

Joseph's suffering despite his favor in the eyes of God is contrasted with the suffering of those who commit sins against God. After Joseph is sold into slavery, the Biblical narrative tangentially focuses on the affairs of the family of Judah, one of the brothers who plotted against Joseph. Judah loses both his children due to their depravity. His first son, Er, is slain by God for being "wicked in the sight of the Lord" (38, 7), without further explanation. Er's brother, Onan, also crosses God by refusing to impregnate Er's widowed wife. In doing so, he neglects the customary "duty of a brother-in-law" (38, 8) out of a selfish knowledge "that the offspring would not be his" (38, 9). This failure to perform in the "morally correct" manner is found "displeasing in the sight of the Lord" (38, 10), so Onan, too, is slain. The brothers' suffering differs profoundly from the hardships endured by Joseph. Unlike Joseph, whose suffering ultimately leads to a beneficial outcome, the punishment afflicting those who disobey God's will is swift and severe.

Joseph's suffering can also be interpreted as forming a link between him and his forefathers. Considered the last patriarch, Joseph must prove himself to God in many of the same ways as those before him. However, his place is far from identical. Throughout the narrative, Joseph assumes a role that is both similar to and profoundly different from those of the other patriarchs. He undergoes many tasks that parallel those completed by the patriarchs before him to achieve his status, but never attains the same relationship with God as his ancestors. He maintains his place as a patriarch, but cultivates a unique relationship with God that serves largely to contemporize the Biblical relationship between an individual and God.

Joseph must earn his place in much the same way as the other patriarchs. Like his forefathers, he must undergo trials to prove both his faith and his capacity to lead the Hebrew people before he can achieve his final position. The suffering he endures throughout the narrative can be viewed as a type of test. Like Abraham, who unquestioningly prepares to sacrifice Isaac on God's demand, Joseph, despite the fact that his righteous actions appear only to lead to trouble, must continue to act morally and avoid temptation with the faith that God will eventually reward his good deeds. Joseph does so, even after his rejection of Potiphar's wife is rewarded with a prison sentence. Joseph's faith in God, however, is not enough. Joseph must also, like his father the patriarch Jacob, earn his position through a struggle with his brothers. He successfully earns his father's love, both because he is "the son of [Jacob's] old age" (37, 2) and because he cleverly sets himself above his brothers by bringing "an ill report of them to their father" (37, 2). As with Jacob, the resulting favoritism lands him in trouble. Just as Jacob was forced to flee his home to escape Esau's anger, Joseph must leave Canaan because of the

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bitter feelings of his jealous brothers.

While Joseph bears many similarities to the other patriarchs, he plays a strikingly different role. Joseph can be interpreted as the patriarch who begins to bridge the gap between ancient and contemporary relationships with God. God allows Joseph "to prosper" (39, 3), but Joseph, unlike the other patriarchs, never engages in a direct dialogue with God. God instead communicates with Joseph through dreams. Ultimately, Joseph's ability to interpret these dreams allows him to assume his role as ruler of Egypt, a fact that demonstrates both his strong understanding of the ways of God, and God's role in his success.

The most striking difference between Joseph and the traditional patriarchs is the role he plays in carrying on his father's legacy. While Joseph is, like the other patriarchs, the favored child, Joseph does not bear his father's legacy alone. Unlike his forefathers, Joseph's line ultimately becomes just one of "the twelve tribes of Israel" (49, 28).

The reunion of the family of Israel coincides with an end to many of Joseph's dualities. Through much of the narrative, Joseph shifts positions and nationalities. In many ways, this state of flux can be seen as representative of the larger transition of the Hebrews under Joseph. Joseph physically moves the Hebrews to Egypt, where they remain for many years. His story also marks a more spiritual transition: whereas God's conversational relationships with the previous patriarchs can be seen as establishing the Hebrews as the "chosen people", Joseph's relationship with God demonstrates that dialogue is not a precondition to a relationship with God. Under Joseph, the people's relationship to God is able to mature and meet a necessary, less direct state. Joseph's more passive relationship with God sets a precedent that is followed for much of the remainder of the Bible.

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