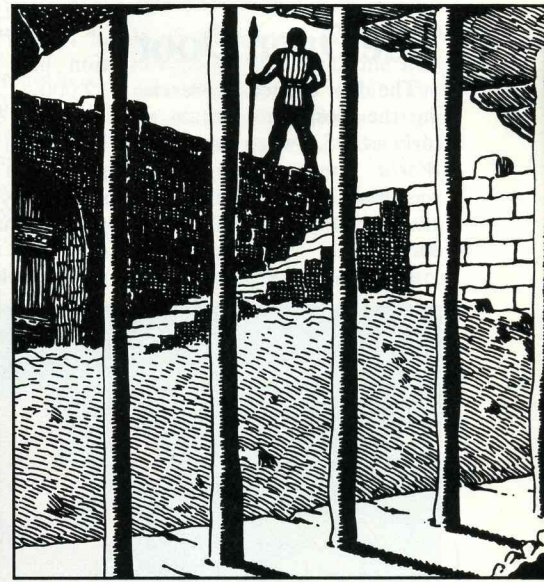


Old Testament Personalities

JOSEPH

By Art Ferdig



Joseph was Jacob's favorite son, the firstborn of Rachel. He was born while Jacob was still working for Laban, near the end of the second term of seven years (Gen. 29:30).

Young Joseph grew up strong, intelligent and capable. And because of his father's special love for him, jealousy developed between Joseph and his older brothers.

The situation worsened. When Joseph went out to tend the flocks with them, he would report their mischief to his father at the end of the day. As far as his brothers were concerned, Joseph was a "daddy's boy" and a tattletale. But to his father, he was a young man of fine character who was growing daily in respect for the laws and power of God.

Jacob even rewarded him with a beautiful coat, tailor-made from many colorful pieces of cloth. But every time he wore it his brothers were reminded of Jacob's favoritism and only became more annoyed.

Then, to make matters worse, Joseph dreamed that he and his broth-

ers were tying sheaves of grain in the field, and their sheaves bowed down to his sheaf. He was only 17 and didn't have the good sense to keep his thoughts to himself. So he told his brothers the dream, and they hated him all the more (Gen. 37:8).

But then Joseph dreamed another dream — that the sun, moon and 11 stars bowed down to him. He again told it to his brothers and even to his father. Jacob rebuked him, having interpreted the sun and moon to be himself and Joseph's stepmother, Leah. He asked, "Shall I and your mother and your brothers bow down ourselves to you?"

Yet Jacob considered these dreams, for he knew they could be from God. But Joseph's brothers only grew angrier.

Sold into slavery

One day when Joseph approached his brothers in the field, they conspired to kill him, intending to throw his body into a pit.

But Reuben, the eldest, convinced them to drop Joseph into the pit

unharméd, suggesting there might be a better solution. He actually intended to rescue Joseph later. For Reuben could have used a little goodwill from Jacob, as he had sinned with Bilhah and lost the birthright (Gen. 35:22, 49:4).

Before Reuben could return to help Joseph, however, a caravan of Ishmaelites came by, bound for Egypt. To Judah, this looked like a solution to the problem of Joseph once and for all. So at the prompting of Judah, his brothers sold Joseph as a slave to the Midianite merchants (descendants of Ishmael) for 20 pieces of silver.

When Reuben returned, he tore his clothes in remorse, for he was the eldest, and held accountable.

But the other brothers took Joseph's coat, dipped it in the blood of a young goat and reported to their father that his favorite son had been killed by a wild beast and the coat was all that remained. In anguish, Jacob tore his clothes and wept. He refused comfort from anyone, saying that he would take this sorrow to his

grave. The merchants sold Joseph to Potiphar, an officer of the pharaoh of Egypt. Joseph was well educated, mannerly and strong, and probably brought a fine price. Potiphar was so impressed with him that he gave him a wage and eventually made him overseer of his household.

Joseph was well liked by everyone and respected. It was obvious that God was with him. He even became

trated, but bitter. She fabricated a story about how Joseph attempted to rape her and left his coat in her bedroom. When Potiphar heard the account, he was angry and had Joseph put into the pharaoh's prison.

The prison years

So Joseph, innocent but without recourse or defense, was consigned to prison. He was a slave and had only

unjust imprisonment and mention his plight before the pharaoh. But the butler, upon his release, forgot to fulfill his promise.

Yet, despite his discouragement and trials, Joseph remained faithful to God. He no doubt prayed often and sought God for strength and patience, knowing that one day God would deliver him, in His own time.

That time came two years later.



Illustrations by Basil Wolverton

somewhat prosperous in the capacity of a slave.

Potiphar's wife

Over a period of time, Potiphar's wife developed an attraction for Joseph — not so much for the way he managed the household, but for his youthful manhood and good looks.

She began, as the scripture says, to "cast her eyes" on him (Gen. 39:7), and one day tried to seduce him while her husband was away.

But Joseph refused her advances, expressing his loyalty to Potiphar and his respect for God's laws. His rejection, however, only strengthened her resolve. She continued her suggestive proposals until finally Joseph tried to avoid her presence altogether. But one day she grabbed him by the arm and asked him to reconsider her offer, for there were no other servants in the house at the time. Joseph refused again, but when she wouldn't let go of his sleeve, he slipped out of his coat and left the house.

This time she was not only frus-

trated, but bitter. She fabricated a story about how Joseph attempted to rape her and left his coat in her bedroom. When Potiphar heard the account, he was angry and had Joseph put into the pharaoh's prison.

So Joseph, innocent but without recourse or defense, was consigned to prison. He was a slave and had only limited civil rights. Yet God saw his plight and gave him immediate favor with the prison guard. The guard saw that Joseph was well educated and responsible, and eventually he made him overseer of the prisoners.

A few months later, two new inmates were brought in — the pharaoh's chief butler and chief baker. Angry at them both, the pharaoh sent them to prison, where they fell under Joseph's charge. Not long after this, the two men both had dreams on the same night and were convinced they held some special meaning, but could find no interpreter. When they told Joseph of their dilemma, he explained that the true interpretation of dreams wasn't possible without the help of his God, the only true God.

They recounted their dreams, and God gave Joseph the meanings: The butler would be restored to his place in the pharaoh's house within three days, but the baker, after three days, would be slain.

Joseph asked, as a personal favor, that the butler remember him and his

Pharaoh himself dreamed a dream (Gen. 41:1). In fact, he dreamed twice the same night. And the dreams were so vivid and unusual that he called in his wise men and magicians for an interpretation.

Pharaoh's dream

He told them what he saw: Seven fat cattle came up out of the Nile and stood eating in the meadow. Then seven lean cattle came up out of the river and devoured the fat cattle, but they still remained thin. And later he dreamed that seven fat, full ears of corn came out on one stalk, and then seven thin and dry ears sprung out and devoured the fat ears.

Pharaoh waited for the interpretation, but his magicians and seers were unable to tell him what the dreams meant.

Then the chief butler remembered Joseph and told the pharaoh how he had interpreted his dream while in prison. This was an answer to many agonizing hours of prayer, for Joseph was finally brought out of prison to appear before the pha-

raoh. Joseph again gave God the credit for his ability, saying that of himself he was helpless to know the interpretation — that it must come from God.

He explained that both dreams referred to the same thing. There would be seven years of plenty, followed by seven years of grievous famine. Joseph suggested that officers be appointed over the land to set aside 20 percent of the harvests during the seven years of plenty, to prepare for the years of famine.

Pharaoh was impressed. He put Joseph in charge of all preparations, and also made him head of his household — second in command throughout all Egypt. What a remarkable turn of events! God raised Joseph from lowly prisoner to mighty ruler of Egypt in one day.

Among Joseph's other blessings was a wife, a gift of the pharaoh. Her name was Asenath, and she was the daughter of a priest of On (quite possibly a priestly order that worshiped the true God, for there were still some in Egypt who respected God's laws). During the years of plenty, she bore him two sons. The first he named Manasseh, which means "forgetting," because he had forgotten his troubles and the ill treatment by his brothers. The second son he named Ephraim, meaning "fruitful," because God had given him so many blessings.

During those years God also abundantly blessed the harvests of Egypt. But after the seventh year passed, the waters of the Nile no longer overflowed the banks, and the famine began — not only in Egypt, but throughout the surrounding countries as well.

Joseph sees his brothers

Now an episode in Joseph's life clearly showed what God had in mind all along — bringing Jacob's descendants (Israel) into Egypt to build them into a nation. God used the famine to get the move started, for the dearth was so severe in Canaan that Jacob was finally forced to send his sons (except Benjamin) to Egypt for food.

The account of their unwitting reunion with Joseph after 22 years and the dramatic, emotion-charged series of events that followed is cov-

ered in great detail in Genesis 42-45. Joseph chose to hide his true identity, and his brothers were brought to a point of exasperation, bewilderment and eventually even humility.

They were brought to their knees before him, as God had long ago shown Joseph in prophetic dreams.

The intrigue finally ended when Benjamin was brought to Egypt on the second trip. This encounter, especially Judah's humble and heartfelt plea on behalf of Benjamin (Gen. 44:18-34), so moved Joseph with emotion that he broke down and told them who he was.

They were astonished, speechless and terrified for their lives.

But Joseph told them not to be alarmed and explained he was in Egypt by God's will — not by their malice — to save the entire family from famine. For there were five years of severe famine left. He then told them that Jacob and his whole household should immediately come down to Egypt and establish themselves in Goshen.

He now spoke directly to them in the Hebrew tongue, not through an interpreter as before. And they finally believed he was their brother. Embracing and weeping, they talked well into the night.

Pharaoh, hearing Joseph's brothers had come to Egypt, was especially pleased. He sent an invitation for them to bring their families and settle in some of Egypt's best land. He even provided wagons to move their wives and little ones and told Joseph that he would absorb the costs.

Joseph gave his brothers each a change of fine clothing, but gave Benjamin, his only full brother, five sets of clothing and 300 pieces of silver. Then he loaded 20 donkeys with gifts and food for his father so there would be plenty to eat during their return trip.

He sent them on their way with a warning not to disagree among themselves or change their minds about returning to Egypt. For he knew they were fearful of explaining to Jacob how they had lied to him and actually sold Joseph into slavery.

Israel comes to Egypt

When Jacob heard that Joseph was somehow alive and governor

over all Egypt, he fainted in shock and disbelief. But when they recited the whole story of what had happened and showed him the gifts and wagons, he finally believed them. This was evidence enough, and he was determined to go to Egypt to see his son.

So his entire household — sons, daughters, grandchildren, servants, cattle and goods — left Canaan and traveled south. Sixty-six blood descendants of Jacob made the trip to Egypt. Here, in a joyous reunion, Jacob was reacquainted with a son he thought dead.

The children of Israel were given the best land of Egypt — the land of Goshen — according to the commandment of the pharaoh. And Joseph provided them with food, for the famine was now very severe.

After the famine the Israelites stayed in Goshen, and Jacob lived out his last days near Joseph. He spent a total of 17 years in Egypt. And in his old age he blessed his sons and Manasseh and Ephraim, the sons of Joseph. Upon death, he was taken by a great procession out of Egypt and buried in Hebron.

But Joseph's brothers were still fearful that Joseph might punish them for selling him into slavery, especially now that their father was dead. They asked his forgiveness, saying this was at the behest of Jacob before he died.

Joseph wept when he heard their request. And when they came and bowed down before him, again a fulfillment of his dreams as a youth, he told them not to be afraid, for it wasn't his duty to judge them for their actions. God, after all, had directed the entire course of events for the good.

Joseph lived to be 110 years old and saw the family of Israel grow into a small, prosperous nation of people. But before he died, he prophesied that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would one day call their nation out of Egypt to take them to the land of promise, according to His covenant. And he made them swear to take his bones up out of Egypt with them.

At death he was embalmed and placed in a coffin to await the exodus. It came, under Moses, about 170 years later. □