

CHAPTER 8

JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS

(*Gen. 45, 50*)

One of the great dangers of allegory and even of thoroughgoing typology is that we do not adequately consider what a passage is telling us. Joseph has been an outstanding sufferer from this tendency. Though there is no support for the suggestion from the New Testament, he was very frequently been regarded as a type of Jesus Christ, or at the very least he has been compared favourably with him. As a result he is seldom looked at objectively enough.

The shortcomings in Jacob's family are obvious enough, yet we gain the impression of very real loyalty and even affection in it. There must, therefore, have been some adequate reason for the deep hatred shown to Joseph by his brothers. It is not questioned today that "the long robe with sleeves" (RSV) given him by Jacob was the sign that he now ranked as the official first-born. Chronicles shows little interest in the Joseph tribes, but in the genealogies in the first book it makes clear (5:1) that since Reuben had rightly forfeited his position, by his incest, there could be no complaint at the first-born of the other wife taking his place. In addition, especially in a large family, this position offered little real advantage.¹

¹ In Israel an estate was divided into a number of equal portions, one more than the number of sons. The birthright of the first-born was to take two of the portions. Obviously with twelve sons the extra thirteenth would not arouse much envy. At the time the extra tribal portion for Joseph could not have been foreseen.

The clue seems to be offered by Jacob's reaction to Joseph's second dream (37:10). Since a significant dream was regarded as coming from outside the dreamer, it would have been unfair to rebuke Joseph for having it. The reason must have been the air of self-satisfaction with which he told it. With this in mind we are probably justified in seeing him flaunting his first-born's garment in front of his brothers, especially Reuben. In addition it is probable that we are to place an unfavourable interpretation on the statement that he brought a bad report of the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah to Jacob (37:2). By the time he was seventeen (37:2), unwise favouritism had gone far to making Joseph a very unpleasant young man. But such are the results of typological exposition that to say this in public may lead to bitter opposition. As I see him gagged, bound and thrown over the back of a camel like a sack of potatoes by the Midianite traders, I can picture him remembering his dreams and contemplating the revenge he would enjoy wreaking on his brothers in days to come.

It is rare for the Bible to indicate explicitly how the Spirit works in the transformation of character. We are next shown Joseph, not as a typical slave giving the minimum of grudging service, but working so whole-heartedly that he caught Potiphar's attention, and so was brought into his house from his labour out of doors (39:2). "And he was in the house of his master" (AV, RSV), "He lived in the house of his Egyptian master (NEB, TEV), and "He lodged in the house of his Egyptian master" (JB) all ignore the Hebrew idiom, which clearly indicates a further step in the improvement of his fortunes. Possibly Joseph recognized that he was reaping what he had sown, and so accepted God's judgment on him.

We next find him in charge of his master's house (39:4). No slave could hold such a position without being able to read and write. It is impossible to establish whether Joseph as favourite son would have learnt these skills while he was still at home. In itself it is quite probable, but if he had, it

would, if the Amarna letters of a somewhat later date are any guide, have been in cuneiform, not in Egyptian hieroglyphics, which were notoriously difficult to master. His ability to do so implies that Joseph was able to win the confidence and favour of the head-slave at the time, and also that he must have taken advantage of every spare moment granted him. God helped Joseph to reach the top, but Joseph helped God to help him.

The second stage in Joseph's spiritual education was his learning that confidence in man was vain. From 40:3 we learn that the prison in which Joseph found himself was under the control of the captain of the guard, i.e. Potiphar. His subordinate, the keeper of the prison, would not have dared to show Joseph favour (39:21–23) without Potiphar's permission, for it was on a charge of mortally offending his master that Joseph had been thrown into jail. This view of things is confirmed by the fact that Potiphar himself made him attendant on two important state prisoners (40:4). The titles chief butler and chief baker conceal from us the fact that they were important court officials, who were obviously under suspicion of having been involved in some intrigue against the Pharaoh. In other words, Joseph was forced to realise that in spite of his loyal and whole-hearted service, his master, knowing full well that his wife's accusation was baseless, had callously sacrificed him for the sake of matrimonial peace.

His second disappointment was probably greater. Pharaoh's chief butler failed to tell his master about Joseph, when he was restored to office, though he had nothing to lose by doing so. "Nothing to lose" – that was the point. When he saw Pharaoh, a god incarnate, desperate to discover what the warning from the gods conveyed in dream-form might mean, he knew that a revived memory would almost certainly bring its reward, and so he remembered Joseph (41:9–13).

Through his double disappointment Joseph had learnt not merely not to put his trust in man, but also not to trust in

himself, two things which very often do not go together. With all the resources of Egypt at his disposal it would have been child's play for him to discover all about his family, the more so as Canaan was clearly under Egyptian control at the time (50:4-14). He knew, however, that once he knew for certain, he might not be able to resist the urge to see his father and Benjamin again. He also knew his father well enough to know that a premature disclosure of what had happened might so arouse his anger as to scatter his family for ever. So he was prepared to wait until God should fulfil his word. This was the easier for him because his later experience confirmed that he could rely on his earlier dreams, which would surely come to pass at the time of God's choosing.

The seven prosperous years came and went according to God's word, and with them a wife and two sons followed to ease the ache of an empty heart. Then followed the years of famine. When Joseph heard that it had extended to Canaan (42:5), he sensed that the time for his brothers' coming could not be far distant. The idea that Joseph made himself personally responsible for the selling of the grain is, of course, ludicrous, though we may be certain that he made frequent, unannounced visits to the selling centres. He will have been as conscientious in his prosperity as he had been in the bitter years of adversity. But no foreigners could enter Egypt without permission, and Joseph will have given instructions to the frontier posts to let him know with all speed, if a group of Hebrews should ask permission to come and buy.

A year and more passed (45:6), and at last his brothers, arrived but without Benjamin. When they arrived at the selling centre to which they had been directed they discovered that the Chief Minister was there on a tour of inspection, and before him they were brought. They scarce ventured to lift their eyes to his glory, while he spoke to them through an interpreter.

Joseph sifted his brothers mercilessly and found that the

years had changed them. They were conscious of their sin against him and they were prepared to sacrifice themselves for their father and Benjamin. Their abject prostration before him was in itself a sign that God's dream-given promise was coming true.

Joseph's intense emotion and tears (42:24; 45:1, 2) show that he had long since forgiven his brothers. Indeed, it is clear that we do not have the right to speak of forgiveness in this context, though there has to be forgiveness by God. He did not, as we so often do, when we are called on to forgive, brush away or make little of what had been done. Twice directly, once indirectly (45:4, 5, 8) he stressed what they had done. Then he balanced this by insisting three times that God had been behind it all (45:5, 7, 8).

So often we base ourselves on the New Testament and say that "in everything God works for good with those who love him" (Rom. 8:28). Yet we speak glibly of forgiving those who have been God's instruments for the working out of his gracious purposes for our good. We may even speak of the difficulty of forgiving, as though it were necessary to forgive our benefactors.

It is no unusual experience for many to find that the even tenor of their life has been interrupted and violently changed by the thoughtlessness, brutality, selfishness, or even malice of others, only to discover that the new path they then followed was obviously the one of God's choice. Why should we blame the instruments, when the main fault lay in our insensibility to God's will and guidance, which forced him to use instruments like these? Joseph was not granted the knowledge why Israel had to go down to Egypt, but he knew full well that it was not simply to escape famine. The God who had brought both plenty and need at the time of his choosing could have dispensed with the latter. Just like his being sold into slavery, it was a means to an end beyond his knowledge.

We seldom realise how often and with what skill God uses the wrath of man to work out his purposes. Though in

his wisdom he had to bring his people into Egypt, he placed them in Goshen under conditions where they could increase and prosper, and yet be relatively untouched by Egyptian thought and idolatry. This could be accomplished only by there being his agent in the seat of power, and this man was Joseph. Even had Jacob been willing to let his son go down to Egypt, he could hardly have achieved the position of second man in the kingdom, the more so as he was a foreigner. They had to ask pardon of God, these brothers of his who had been so heartless, but there was nothing for him to forgive.

Seventeen years passed (47:28), and Jacob's turn came to join Abraham and Isaac in the family burial-place in the cave of Machpelah. Once the days of mourning and the funeral were over the brothers appeared humbly before Joseph (50:16, 18 NEB – in the former verse NEB follows LXX) and told him that their father had given them a last command, that they should ask Joseph's forgiveness for all the wrong they had done to him, and now in fear and trembling they made this their humble petition. To Joseph's tears they added their own (50:18 NEB, with the change of one letter in Hebrew); they added, "You see, we are your slaves" (NEB), which was equivalent to saying that Joseph had the right and power to do what he liked with them.

Theirs were tears of fear, but Joseph wept from a well-nigh broken heart. It is not likely that he paid much attention to the alleged message from his dead father. Though it is not inconsistent with what we know of him, he would have been able and willing to say it personally to Joseph, when he made arrangements for his funeral (47:29–31). It is likely that his brothers were availing themselves of the convenient fact that the dead do not rise up to call us liars. But his brothers' words and actions showed that for the best part of twenty years they had not believed him and had thought that he was only biding his time for vengeance for his father's sake. Now as official first-born and the power

behind the throne of Egypt he could do as he liked.

Joseph in his answer stressed that sin cannot be made less by vagueness of language: "You meant evil against me". In the long run we never do any good by finding excuses, by minimizing wrong, by calling black grey. But he asked the question that all who are wronged should ask: "Am I in the place of God?"

The principle behind it has been grasped by British law. Neither the person who claims to have been wronged nor his kith and kin determine the issue. At least in serious cases it is left to a jury of ordinary men and women to decide whether in fact wrong has been done. If they say yes, the penalty, if any, is fixed not by them but by the judge, who in most cases knows far more about the accused than did the jury, when they gave their verdict. This is an analogy of a position we very often find ourselves in. We cannot avoid having to decide from time to time whether an action was right or wrong. If we have suffered from it, it is generally wise to leave the decision to others, for it may be hard for us to see how much blame we bear. In every case, however, we must never forget that it is God who is the judge, and that he alone is competent to apportion the blame and to fix whatever penalties there may be.

So in asking, "Am I in the place of God?" Joseph was telling his brothers that peace for a guilty conscience and forgiveness for evil done had to be sought in God's presence, not in man's. That did not mean that where it was possible reparation should not be done. That is a principle that is clearly laid down in the Law. While not only the sin-offering but also the guilt-offering were brought to God, and in the antitype have been brought by Jesus Christ, yet reparation had to be made to the one wronged.

Yet what reparation could they make? Joseph had all a man could desire and far more than he would ever have had, if they had not sinned against him. In addition he could say out of a full heart, "God meant it for good". The one thing he wanted from them was that they should believe him.

He had learnt in the school of suffering what a privilege it was to be allowed to suffer for God, so that God's purpose might be fulfilled. We can hardly suggest that he knew that ultimately the chief sufferer would be God himself. There are increasing intimations of this in the growing revelation of God in the Old Testament, but we can hardly look for the knowledge in Genesis. Where this realisation dawns on the sufferer, the desire for vengeance and reparation disappear. There may be deep sorrow for those that have done wrong and a longing for the restoration. In some measure the prayer will go up, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing".

This prayer of our Lord's as he was nailed to the cross sums up what has been said of Joseph. There is here the recognition that men, whether we call them good or bad, do not grasp the role they are playing in the onward march of events. There is the acknowledgement of the fact of evil and of the need of forgiveness. But Jesus, suffering as the perfect man, does not forgive them, for he has nothing to forgive – they have simply been blindly working out God's purposes for the redemption of mankind. So he entrusts them to the mercy of the all-merciful God, who was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

It is perhaps a sign of true and genuine reconciliation that when Joseph came to die at the age of a hundred and ten, it was not to his sons and grandsons that he gave commandment about his body that would be embalmed but to his brothers, or at least to those who were still alive. By this he showed that he knew that he could have complete confidence in them and their descendants.