

# JOSEPH'S EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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A reflection on the passions and emotions of Joseph is presented in three parts: (1) Genesis 37: Joseph Among His Brothers; (2) Genesis 38-41: Joseph in Egypt: Potiphar, Prison, and Pharaoh's Dreams; and (3) Genesis 42-50: Joseph and God's Design. Attention is given to several psychological theories of emotion, and a theological view of Joseph's emotional life is elaborated which attempts to be faithful to the message of Genesis.

## JOSEPH AMONG HIS BROTHERS

One of the unexamined assumptions we make about emotions is that they are purely a private matter, that begin and end only inside one's own skin. A more adequate view is that they are aroused, recognized and expressed in a historical, social, and theological context with other people.<sup>1</sup> This probably happens first of all in our families, and then later in wider contexts, such as school, business, and government. This intersubjective view of the emotions can be seen in the early experiences of Joseph, beginning in Genesis 37.

We have not known Joseph for very long when the first significant thing we learn about him is his estimation of his own special importance in a large family: *Joseph was tending the flocks with his brothers . . . and he brought their father a bad report about them* (Gen. 37:2).

It is not likely that this sense of superiority is an original thought that springs up spontaneously in Joseph's imagination. It is more likely that it comes in some measure from Jacob. Joseph loves his father and he has known from an early age how important the sheep are to Jacob. In the previous generation, Jacob's brother Esau had scoffed at tending flocks, preferring instead the thrill of the hunt. Jacob has lived by a different vision, however. Caring more for the well-being of the whole clan than for pursuing his own sense of personal enjoyment, Jacob looks to the future God has promised them. He sees in the sheep a more sustainable way of life than that practised by Esau the hunter. How carefully does a devoted son listen to his father's stories of the past? Joseph has caught on to an important part of Ja-

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cob's story – he hears something in his father's recounting of his rivalry and conflict with Esau, something that plants the seed of superiority over brothers in his imagination. Yet, what Joseph has not fully absorbed from Jacob's stories, or what Jacob has failed to convey, is an understanding of the importance of covenant with God and with one's brothers.<sup>2</sup>

In all likelihood, Joseph has learned this feeling of being greatly favored over his brothers in other ways, too. The beautiful coat Jacob gives him is only the most visible sign of Jacob's affection, that is now painfully clear to everyone. So bitterness begins to set in between Joseph and his brothers, bitterness as a hardened and rehearsed attitude rather than just a passing moment of anger. We encounter unanswerable questions in every family, and this one is no exception.

Why is Jacob so blind to the effect his actions are having on the unity of his family? Why does Joseph continue to tell them about his dreams of superiority?

*'We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field, when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright while your sheaves gathered round mine and bowed down to it . . . I had another dream, and this time the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me'*  
(37:7-9).

As a consequence of these words, Joseph is now the focus of anger and resentment by his brothers. For Jacob, the enmity between his sons is becoming more visible, and more regrettable. We are told that Joseph finally receives a rebuke from him. Does it come too late to restore their unity? The next time the brothers are far away, Jacob sends Joseph to inquire about his brothers again, with hopes that they may yet find reconciliation. Joseph makes the right gesture – he is still willing to go out to them. We ought to pay special attention to the charge Jacob gives him. The order of his words is significant: *'Go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flocks'* (v. 14). If Joseph is paying attention, he can see now that the brothers come first in Jacob's heart, and the sheep are secondary.

Brothers first, sheep second. Is this a lesson that Joseph is ready to learn, too? The story gives one clue suggesting that Joseph is beginning to gain some wisdom about his father's deepest desire for the whole family. He does not give up after he initially has trouble locating his brothers. He says to one

## JOSEPH'S EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

of the men of Shechem, *'I am looking for my brothers . . . and the flocks'* (v. 16). Here Joseph is willing to seek out his brothers, but what he will find is that they are ready to betray him: *'Here comes that dreamer . . . . Let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns . . . . Then we'll see what becomes of his dreams'* (vv. 19-20).

The brothers may not be able to help what they are *feeling* toward Joseph, but they do have a moral choice about what they will *do* with their feelings of resentment. In this momentous case, they fail miserably before God. We are meant to take Genesis 37:25 as a sign of their hard-heartedness – they can calmly sit down together to eat a meal, even though they have just plotted their brother's death. Reuben alone is horrified by what his brothers are about to do, and he quickly suggests an alternative that may yet save Joseph's life. As it happens, however, it is Judah who prevents them from shedding their brother's blood, by selling him to passing caravaneers instead.

At this crucial moment, foresight and loyalty to God and to their father Jacob are in short supply among the brothers, but even the little bit that Reuben and Judah show turns out to be something that God will use to His purpose. Joseph himself must be feeling a strange mixture of relief and despair. His life has been spared, but he is cut off from his father and his homeland, and he is now on his way to slavery. For their part, the brothers have resolved to live with their terrible secret and with the lie they have agreed on to keep it sealed. And as for Jacob, the blood-stained coat he gave in extravagant love has come back to haunt him, and there will be many years of heartbreak and desolation ahead for him.<sup>3</sup>

*Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. 'No' he said, 'in mourning will I go down to Sheol to my son.' So his father wept for him* (vv. 34-35).

The best account of Joseph's emotions, then, would be one that sees him in a web of family relationships. It is a web that stretches back into his father's past and the conflicts of the previous generation. It includes his brothers, their feelings of rivalry, and even the family's way of making a living. Above all, it is rooted in the covenant and the future that God has promised, although right now Joseph has every reason to believe that this covenant has been completely eclipsed by what has befallen him.<sup>4</sup>

## JOSEPH IN EGYPT: POTIPHAR, PRISON, AND PHARAOH'S DREAMS

A second unexamined assumption we often make about emotions is that they are irrational forces beyond our control, disruptive and stupid, unthinking and counterproductive, against our better interests, and often ridiculous.<sup>5</sup> In this view, the passions are unwelcome eruptions in an otherwise tranquil and well-ordered life, and they wreak havoc with moral judgment.<sup>6</sup> Joseph's story, however, can show us the significance of ordering the passions in a dynamic equilibrium.

What strong emotions can be expected to dominate Joseph's life in the middle years of his story? It is clear that Joseph must overcome despair in his new surroundings. What future can there possibly be for a slave in a strange land? What will be the source of his hope? It is not hard to imagine what Joseph might have prayed had he known the Psalms:

Psalm 13:1 *How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?*

Psalm 70:1 *Hasten, O God, to save me. O Lord, come quickly to help me.*

Psalm 130:1 *Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord.*

Yet it is one of the great surprises of Joseph's story that we do not find in it very much in the way of lament. It is almost as though he had skipped right over the lament signified in Psalm 73:2 – *I almost lost my foothold*, and experienced instead only the great affirmation of Psalm 73:26 – *My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*<sup>7</sup> Joseph is able to persevere because he knows that, in spite of it all that has happened to him, and all that will happen, *God is with him* (Gen. 39:2-3).

Indeed, the main point about Joseph's passions in this middle stage of his story is that he seems to have them under complete control. In the recent past, the life that he knew and loved was snatched away from him because of his own unbridled narcissism and the uncontrolled passions of his brothers. In this new place, Joseph seems to sense that without God's help, he could easily be ruined again by unruly passions, whether they are his own or someone else's.

## JOSEPH'S EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

This ability to be master of one's own emotional life is what Josephus brings to the fore in his portrait of Joseph. For Josephus, Joseph is impressive because he displays all the virtues that the Greeks admired: (1) *wisdom*, which he shows in dealing with Pharaoh's dreams; (2) *justice*, in the distribution of Egypt's grain; (3) *courage*, while in prison; (4) *temperance*, in the temptations he faces in Potiphar's house; and (5) *piety*, with respect to God's providential guiding of events.<sup>8</sup>

In Potiphar's house, Joseph will show that he is maturing into a man of integrity and ability, one who can be trusted by his master in all matters, great and small. With Joseph managing the household, Potiphar can turn his attention to the tasks Pharaoh has given him, and when he comes home, Potiphar can *concern himself with nothing except the food that he will eat* (v. 6). When Potiphar's wife invites Joseph in a very direct way to have sexual relations with her, his principled refusal shows that he is no longer the self-centered youth whose dream is that everyone should bow down to him. Joseph knows his responsibility to his master Potiphar, and ultimately to God (v. 9). Though Joseph is young and in his prime, his faith in God and his integrity help him control his strong sexual feelings.

Yet Joseph's integrity is also the very thing that lands him back in prison after unjust accusations are made against him by Potiphar's wife. How dark the path ahead must have seemed to him then! However, even here his ability to lead shines through, and soon he is running the prison (vv. 22-23). Two more years in jail for a young man who has done nothing blameworthy – will they lead him to hate others because of the injustice he has suffered? No. When Pharaoh finally hears of his special ability where dreams are concerned, Joseph is ready. Pharaoh accepts Joseph's interpretation that the cows and the corn represent fat years and lean.

It would have been easy for Joseph to take the credit for the right interpretation of the dreams, but rather than bringing glory on himself, Joseph humbly glorifies the true source of his wisdom: *'The interpretation of dreams belongs to God'* (41:16). It is especially noteworthy that this has been a constant refrain in Joseph's life. In the house of Potiphar, in the shadows of prison, and in the court of Pharaoh, Joseph has acknowledged God as sovereign in every place he has been (39:9, 40:8, 41:16).

Recognizing that God is with Joseph, and that he can lead Egypt through the difficult times ahead, Pharaoh grants him the necessary power and authority to collect, store, and distribute grain. Joseph must wonder as he surveys Egypt from his chariot – this is not quite the dream he had so long ago as a child, but is it not pretty close to it, after all?

Joseph marries in Egypt, and his wife bears him two sons. Their names are significant: *'Manasseh, for God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household . . . and Ephraim, for God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction'* (vv. 50-53). The names Joseph gives to his children offer us a glimpse into an inner life that has been full of struggle, but for a precious moment is now composed and serene.

#### GENESIS 42-50: JOSEPH AND GOD'S DESIGN

In the Book of Genesis, there are three sets of brothers whose actions raise different possibilities for reunion after episodes of harm. In the case of Cain and Abel, because Cain murders Abel, there can be no reconciliation between the brothers. With Jacob and Esau, there is a real possibility that Esau will kill Jacob. Jacob has been afraid to see his brother, because he gained their father's blessing by deception. There is a dramatic scene in Genesis 33 where they meet each other again after many years of separation. At first no one knows what Esau will do, but then they embrace each other and achieve a partial reconciliation.

Which pattern will Joseph's life follow? That is the question that emerges when Joseph's starving brothers come to Egypt in search of grain. He has the power to follow in Cain's footsteps if that suits him, and destroy those who hurt him long ago. He can deal with his brothers on a simple economic level, remaining a stranger to them, and then sending them on their way. Or yet again, he can begin a difficult process of forgiveness and reconciliation with them, the outcome of which will be uncertain. We should recall now that the Greek Virtue interpretation given by Josephus emphasized that Joseph's passions and emotions were all under control, but the unexpected reappearance of his brothers has reopened all the questions in his life that he thought were solved.

## JOSEPH'S EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Later on, we will have several vivid signs of Joseph's emotional bewilderment: he breaks down in tears on five separate occasions (42:24, 44:30, 45:1-2, 14-15, 50:17).

When he first recognizes them in Genesis 42:8, he has not had time to decide how he will deal with them, and this uncertainty is at the root of his decision to conceal his true identity from them. We can easily imagine that most of all he wants to see his brother Benjamin and his father Jacob, but he will need to send his brothers back home as his unwitting instruments to accomplish this. When looked at in this way, Joseph's harsh words and the brief time he has them locked up are his way of playing for time, because he simply does not know what path he will take. God, though, in His providence, has given Joseph an opportunity to be reconciled with his brothers. It will take time, but Joseph will make the right choice.

Under the rubric forgiveness versus reconciliation, we can observe several other dynamics in Joseph's approach to a possible reunion with his brothers. Forgiveness is something that one person can do on his own, and it seems likely that Joseph reaches this level fairly early in his encounter with his brothers. Being reconciled, however, is something that both sides have to participate in actively, and it is not completely clear that the brothers show the kind of full repentance that would make this a strong possibility. In their favor, though, we might note three scenes. (1) In 42:21 they say to each other: *'We are guilty concerning our brother, because we saw the distress of his soul . . . yet we would not listen.'* (2) They show a good deal of integrity in accounting for the money that Joseph has planted in their sacks in Genesis 43. (3) Their spokesman, Judah, shows compassion for Jacob's vulnerable heart – he offers to give himself as a slave in place of Benjamin, since he knows how much it would hurt his father to lose Benjamin just as he lost Joseph earlier (44:18-34).

When Joseph hears these words from Judah, he drops the mask he has been wearing and reveals himself: *'I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. Don't be grieved nor angry with yourselves that you sold me, for God sent me before you to preserve life, to give you food and save you for a great deliverance'* (45:4-7). This is what God brought about in His providence, says Joseph. I will not harm you. As Joseph will say later: *'You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good'*. If Joseph's childhood dream had remained

exactly the same, we might expect his next words to be – So that I could become a powerful man in Egypt and have you bow down to me! But by the grace of God, Joseph is no longer a self-centered child, and the good that God has brought about is not a private matter that benefits Joseph alone. Instead, Joseph's reading of the whole situation is one of much broader compassion.<sup>9</sup> *'God meant it for good, in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive'* (50:20).

#### CONCLUSION

Joseph's emotional life resembles the angels in Jacob's dream about the ladder – descending and ascending, rarely standing still. He began as a self-absorbed child. Though he was betrayed by his brothers and knew hopelessness, he learned to keep trusting in God. He did not become bitter, but kept looking to the future and he was faithful in each setting where he found himself. Some situations with his brothers nearly overwhelmed him, but he sought strength from God, and he learned to be grateful and give glory to God in all things. When he could have exacted revenge, he sought reconciliation instead. And although his early life had been dominated by narcissism, he grew in compassion for others, and his awe for God's design also grew to be boundless.

#### NOTES

1. Fraser N. Watts, "Psychological and Religious Perspectives on Emotion," *International Journal for Psychology of Religion*, Vol. 6:2 (1996) pp. 71-87. See especially pages 74-77 for a more social view of the emotions.
2. For an account of Jacob, Joseph, and covenant in Genesis, see Daniel J. Elazar, "Covenant and Community," *Judaism* 49(4) (2000) pp. 387-398.
3. G. S. Gerson, "The Psychology of Grief and Mourning in Judaism," *Journal of Religion and Health*, Vol. 16:4 (1977) pp. 260-274.
4. Abraham Ahuvia, "Events in the Joseph Story," *Beth Mikra*, Vol. 106 (1986) pp. 271-280.
5. Robert C. Solomon, *The Passions: The Myth and Nature of Human Emotion* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983) p. 239.
6. Kathleen V. O'Connor, "Reconfiguring the Emotions in the Psychology of Religion," *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, Vol. 6:3 (1996) pp. 165-173.
7. Leslie C. Allen, "Psalm 73: Pilgrimage from Doubt to Faith," *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, Vol. 7 (1997) pp. 1-10.
8. Louis H. Feldman, "Josephus' Portrait of Joseph," *Revue Biblique*, 99:2 (1992) pp. 379-417.
9. Louis E. Newman, "The Quality of Mercy: On the Duty to Forgive in the Judaic Tradition," *Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 15:2 (1987) pp. 155-172.

