

Genesis | Joseph's amazing technicolor

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Alison Sampson ~ Gen 37:1-4, 12-2, with allusions to Matt 14:22-33

Most of us went to Sunday School; we know how it goes. Lucky Joseph gets an Amazing Technicolor® Dreamcoat, travels to Egypt, and saves the world with the blessing of Elvis. It's a musical, a Veggie Tale, a children's story, and thus it is very effectively de-fanged.

If, however, we choose to read as adults, we might notice a thing or two. We might notice the reiteration of sibling rivalry that tears the families of Genesis apart. We might notice that Joseph's own brothers conspire to murder him and dump his body, unburied and unmourned. We might notice the violence as they rip Joseph's robe off him and throw him into the pit, and then as they change plans and sell him into slavery instead. And, if we read ahead, we might think about how a very beautiful young man will be used by those who have enslaved him, and how he is the victim of a sexual assault yet blamed and imprisoned for it, and how he is repeatedly attacked and rejected by people who hold all the power. Then, perhaps, it doesn't sound much like a children's story at all.

Reading as adults, we might also notice a thing or two about Joseph himself. While his brothers are out being manly men tending the family flocks, like his father Jacob before him, Joseph is found at home. He's not described for his strength or ruggedness, but for being 'beautifully proportioned and attractive' (39:6). And, as his father's favourite, he is given a special garment. Contra the musical, it's not actually a coat of many colours, ancient clothes-dyeing practices being nothing like our own. Instead, he's given a *ketonet pasim*: a robe of wrists and ankles. In other words, it's a long garment with sleeves.

This garment is very interesting. The phrase only appears one other time in the biblical witness, in 2 Samuel 13. Now, the writers of scripture were sophisticated and deliberate in their storytelling. There's not a phrase without layers of meaning; there's not a word out of place. So when a word or phrase appears so rarely in scripture, we do well to investigate. What, then, do we find in 2 Samuel 13?

There, we find a story about the rape of David's daughter, Tamar, by her half-brother Amnon. As is so common in these situations, after Amnon has raped her he is filled with disgust, so he throws her out. Then, says the text, 'Now she was wearing a ketonet pasim, for this is how the virgin daughters of the king were clothed in earlier times.' (2 Samuel 13:18). As the door is bolted behind her, Tamar tore her ketonet pasim in anguish; as a result of the rape, her family tore itself apart.

So you might say Joseph is given a princess dress. Adding a layer, it's the garment worn by another person who, like Joseph, was assaulted by family then cast out, whose ketonet pasim was also torn and stained with blood, and whose family was also ripped apart by the episode. The link is strong, and provides further commentary on Joseph's experience.

Let's step back a moment to think about the pit. Throughout scripture, 'the pit' means Sheol. It's the place of shadows, of non-being, of social death. Those who are in the pit have been erased from family and community, from memory. They are no more. And, having torn off his mark of difference, the pit is where his brothers throw Joseph. Then they take his princess dress, cover it with blood, and tell his father that he's dead, seeking to erase him from their family story. It sounds a lot like a hate crime or honour killing, in which the one who is perceived as different, transgressive or shameful is destroyed.

Now, I am not claiming that Joseph is gay, trans or intersex. These are modern categories. We know very little about how gender and sexuality were constructed when these texts were written, and it's not appropriate to read our categories back into the text. On the other hand, I am suggesting that Joseph presents as queer. That is, he presents in ways which are gender non-conforming and which his own brothers loathe. Joseph might be his father's favourite. Even so, it turns out he is extremely vulnerable in his family. He is so much of an outsider to his brothers, so hated and resented, that they conspire to abduct, strip, kill and erase him. Like so many gay, trans and intersex people today, and like so many women and children, Joseph lacks power in his social world, and the people who are supposed to love and protect him instead seek to destroy him.

Turning to our cultural moment, we live in a society where, most weeks, a woman is murdered by an intimate partner or ex who seeks to erase her. It's a society in which many gay and trans folk are still being cast out by their

families and churches. I personally know several Josephs who've been kicked out by 'good Christian folk.' One of our Josephs has been forced to live out of home for several years already; he's still a teenager. We also live in a society in which the political right galvanises support by mobilising people's discomfort around trans folk, and this movement is growing very rapidly. And we live in a society where far too many LGBTI+ folk feel so alone in the pit into which other people have chosen to cast them, that they end up destroying themselves.

Is there any good news? Going back to the story, in this moment I suggest it lies with Reuben. When his brothers talk about killing Joseph, Reuben diverts them. He suggests instead throwing Joseph into the pit, quietly resolving to fetch him out later and return Joseph to their father. By this he tempers their worst impulses and mitigates the hate. Sure, he doesn't teach them to love Joseph and maybe he doesn't really love Joseph himself yet. Even so, by stepping in when their plans are only words, he changes their action.

Reuben can do this because he's in the in-group. He's not his father's favourite. He doesn't swan around in a princess dress. His head isn't full of dreams. Instead, he's the oldest son, reliable, one of the good guys, one of 'us', and he uses this privilege to interrupt the hate.

In this story, then, Reuben is the saviour. Incomplete, yes. Thwarted by Judah, yes. But by stepping out of the boat of brotherhood, he saves Joseph's life.

Now, I would love to think that none of us are ever faced with such a choice. However, I suspect that most of us encounter some form of prejudice and hatred every day. The stupid comment made by a family member. The gross joke told by a neighbour. The ignorant assumptions made by a golfing buddy, a girlfriend at coffee, or that bloke from the men's shed. And, of course, we hear public figures blaming women for their abuse and making false claims about trans folk, and who stir up fear and intensify loathing and seek to band us together through hate.

Notice that Reuben interrupted his brothers when it was only words, before they took murderous action; and notice that this salvific act meant that Joseph lived. In the same way, we, too, can interrupt our family, our friends, our neighbours, when it's 'only' words. We can interrupt before the words snowball with a million other words into a more violent persecution. We can

also make choices about which politicians, journalists and commentators we listen to and support, and which we speak against and de-platform. When we witness the ignorance, the false claims, the contempt, the hate, we can choose politeness and bite our tongues and allow prejudice to flourish – or, we can risk social backlash and, like Reuben, try to divert or interrupt the hate.

Turning inwards, I know I'm not the only person who has intrusive thoughts which are not always loving, life-giving or kind. As products of our society, we have all internalised messages of hate. When a hostile idea bubbles up in us, we are not responsible for that first thought. But we are responsible for what happens next. When we think terrible thoughts about other people, when we make prejudiced assumptions, when we resist a pronoun or name, when we recall a lie or remember a joke that causes harm, do we pause? Do we name this first thought to God in confession? Do we seek to make things right? Or do we spew the poison into the world and contribute to the hate?

My friends, we live in a world where evil flows and swells all around. We don't need to understand other people in order to love and protect them, and we can interrupt the hate. We can let the Judahs know that their words and their plans are not okay. And if enough of us do this work, it makes a difference. It really does. One Reuben saved Joseph's life; three or five might have prevented his sale into slavery. One steadily affirming adult in a trans kid's life slashes their suicide risk. One loving neighbour is good news to someone who's drowning. One calmly affirming congregation gives a queer family a place to belong.

So let us resist any words, any claims, any attempts which will throw someone into the pit. And when the Josephs are tossed by waves and lashed by storms, let us draw them into a circle of safety. When they're languishing in some dark hellhole, let us raise them up. When someone seeks to erase them, let us speak their pronouns loud and clear and use their chosen name. And let us mix up our metaphors and seek peace and pursue it: even if it means risking the storm by stepping out of the boat. Amen. Ω