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Potiphar's Wife

...a dysfunctional boy and a bored woman
An Aggada based on Genesis 37:36, 39:1-23
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Every story, every historical account, is biased. That's not bad or good, it is simply the reality of the way humans tell their stories. The great legends in the Hebrew scriptures are no exception. The Hebrews told their own stories.

The Joseph saga is told from the Hebrew point of view, but I often wondered how the others in the story might tell it. Potiphar's wife, for instance The biblical story-tellers don't even give us her name.

I wondered how she might tell her story. The story of a bored, spoiled high-born woman and a kid in his late teens, far from home, in a foreign culture, living by his wits, driven by his surging gonads.

A soliloquy

It all depends on who you believe, I guess. I didn't tell my side very well, and even my husband Potiphar didn't really believe me. Oh, I know. He said he did. He had to for the sake of his pride and politics. I come from a powerful family too, and it wouldn't do for Potiphar to publicly accuse me of adultery.

He didn't accuse me privately either, except with his eyes. Except with his body. Although actually, Potiphar was more upset about losing Joseph than he was about anything I might have done.

No, of course he didn't say that. But a woman knows these things.

Whatever you may have heard about this ugly affair, you need to know it wasn't as simple as the stories that got passed around Egypt. It was not just Joseph trying to get me into bed, or me getting the hots for a young hunk.

Joseph was very good looking and a charmer, and he knew it. In fact, sometimes he was an arrogant twit. He was also a lonely, frightened mixed up kid. His family was so

messed up. His brothers had grabbed him one day when they were out with the flocks and they beat up on him and threw him into a deep hole. Then when some Midianite traders came along, they sold him as a slave.

That's how he came into my house. Potiphar bought him at the slave market. I remember noticing him when Potiphar's guard brought him into the courtyard. They gave him a good whipping, something they always did with a new slave. "That's for nothing," said Potiphar. "Just think of what you'll get if you do something."

Joseph cried and yelled under the whipping. And I wanted to run out to him – to hold him and comfort him like the child that he was. He seemed too small and vulnerable.

But he was also very clever. And it took him almost no time to learn a few words of Egyptian. He worked hard. Very hard. I think he worked so hard because he was so afraid, and working was the only thing that made the fear stop. Potiphar couldn't see all that of course. Potiphar just saw a good, hard working slave, and so gradually Joseph got more responsibility, more independence, and even power.

Power over Potiphar. Joseph spoke fluent Egyptian in a couple of years. He spoke so beautifully to Potiphar. "Wooed" him. Yes, that's the word. He never flattered Potiphar. But Joseph sprinkled his speech with flattering inferences, especially when talking to the other servants. And of course it got back to Potiphar. As the teenage kid became a young man, he had Potiphar wound around his little finger. Joseph wooed him as a lover might – stroked him with compliments and softened him with thoughtfulness.

Potiphar put him in charge of everything. "You are in charge of my whole household," Potiphar said grandly. "Except for my food, which you must not touch because you are not Egyptian and therefore unclean." I wondered at the time if "whole household" included me.

Joseph enjoyed his power. He ordered Potiphar's tailor to make him a coat. "A coat of many colors – and with long sleeves," he ordered. "But not quite as nice as Potiphar's," added. " "That would be an insult to my kind and gentle master. Almost as nice, but not quite."

Joseph loved to boss the other slaves around, and often treated them more harshly than Potiphar. He called them "dirty slaves" sometimes, forgetting I think, that he was still a slave himself.

I forgot he was a slave. Because he was in charge, Joseph no longer had to work with his hands so he could wear his long-sleeved colored cloak. There was no getting away from it. He cut a handsome figure and he knew it.

I had time on my hands. My God, I had time on my hands. There were banquets and royal functions to go to, and some entertaining, but other than keeping myself beautiful for those occasions, I had nothing to do. So Joseph and I talked.

Oh, my we talked. About everything. And as we talked, we became closer. More vulnerable to each other. Sometimes he was a little boy again, a terribly mixed up and frightened little boy, a little boy who missed his mother terribly, a little boy who needed to be cuddled, a little boy who had learned to survive by his wits but whose fearful motto was, "Do unto others before they do you."

Joseph had an almost desperate need to be loved, though he would not admit it. But there was a cold, calculating, fearful side as well, and it frightened me. The way he

talked with steel-eyed detachment about his family – his brothers– just sent shivers up my spine.

I don't know who he thought I was. A spoiled brat? A rich bitch? For one thing, I was old enough to be that mother who had died in child-birth with his brother Benjamin. Sometimes Joseph talked to me as he might have talked to his mother. Joseph needed a mother.

I didn't need an adult son. I'm not sure what I needed but I didn't want to be his mother.

I grew up wealthy and pampered– a snotty kid from a rich family where you get everything you want and nothing that you really need.

Potiphar didn't love me. Our wedding was arranged by our fathers. The first time I saw him was on our wedding day. He was impotent. Frightened, I guess. So was I, for that matter. Things got a little better as we got to know each other, but not much. Potiphar and I had what you might call, an arrangement of convenience. We did all the right things publicly, but privately we mostly ignored each other.

Both of us were desperately lonely. Potiphar would never have admitted that, and I didn't know it until Joseph and I began to have real conversations. You don't know what you've missed until you have it. Or until you lose it.

I didn't plan to get involved sexually with Joseph. The thought had crossed my mind and my body, but I had suppressed it. The consequences of adultery in Egypt were too frightening to even think about. And I'm not sure how it happened, but the afternoon was hot and we were inside where it was cooler. Joseph and I had talked for several hours. Then we ate and drank some wine.

I was embroidering. It helps when you are bored to keep your hands moving at least. I poked my finger with a needle, and I winced. Joseph, with all that charm he could turn on so easily, said, "Let me kiss it better," and the next thing I knew we were kissing each other and fondling each other and taking our clothes off.

Then I heard the door slam and I knew one of the other slaves was coming into the house. Joseph heard it too and ran, and there I was, half dressed, with Joseph's many-colored cloak on the floor beside me as the slave walked in. I panicked.

"Help!" I screamed. "Joseph tried to rape me. Joseph tried to rape me. Get Potiphar, quick. Tell him Joseph tried to rape me."

I ran into my room and slammed the door and cried and screamed and pounded on my pillow. Then I knew what I had done to Joseph. Potiphar would have to kill him. Or send him to jail at least. And there was nothing I could do about it now.

Even if I went to Potiphar and told the truth. Potiphar would have his honor to protect. Joseph had to pay the price.

But so did I. So did I.

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