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Tribulations of the Patriarch Joseph and Jesus in Greek and Latin Piety

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TRIBULATIONS OF THE PATRIARCH JOSEPH AND JESUS IN GREEK AND LATIN PIETY

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Introduction

This paper, presented at the Medieval Studies Congress (Kalamazoo, Michigan) in May 2005, builds on the essay “[Jews and Judaism in the Medieval Latin Liturgy](#)” by J. Frank Henderson and me in *The Liturgy of the Medieval Church*, ed. Thomas J. Heffernan and E. Ann Matter (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001) and on my interest in the Passion of Jesus and Christian-Jewish relations.¹

I. The Early Church

Following the Jewish methods of searching the Scriptures to understand current events, the early Christian preachers and writers looked to the three-part Jewish Bible to deepen their insights into the meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Joseph the patriarch is not discussed at length in the N.T. except for Stephen’s speech in Acts 7:9-18.² This is a historical review without reference to Jesus. However, before 160 Justin Martyr includes Joseph among the ancient heroes who point to Jesus (*Dialogue with Trypho* 126:1). In Alexandria Philo’s allegorical studies of Genesis were influential on Clement and Origen. In his 15th homily on Genesis, preserved in Latin, Origen offered the following reflection:³

Joseph laid his hands on his father’s eyes (Gn 46:4). Jeriboam, who made two golden calves (1 Kg 12:28) and wanted people to adore them, was from the tribe of Joseph; in a certain way, he laid his hands on the eyes of Israel, he rendered them blind and closed them so that he would not see his impiety. All this is for the transgressions of Jacob and for the sin of the house of Israel (Micah 1:5)

An act of piety may signify a reprehensible action...the true Joseph, our Lord and Savior, when he placed his hand of flesh on the eyes of a blind man and restored the sight which he had lost, extends his spiritual hands on the eyes of the Law, which the fleshly/corporal intelligence of the scribes and Pharisees have blinded, and restored their sight, so that those for whom the Lord unveiled the Scriptures (Lk 24:32) discover the spiritual view and understanding of the Law.

¹ See my essay, “[The Death of Jesus and the Death of the Temple](#),” in Johnathan Burham (ed.), *Perspectives on the Passion of the Christ* (New York: Miramax, 2004) 65-80. The essay by Gary A. Anderson, “Joseph and the Passion of Our Lord,” *The Art of Reading Scripture* (ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 198-215 complements this study nicely.

² In Jn 2:5, Mary’s words, “Do whatever he tells you,” echoes the command of Pharaoh in Gn 41:55.

³ Sources Chrétiennes 7 bis (Paris: Cerf, 1985) 350-93.

For the Lord Jesus “lays his hands on our eyes” so that we begin to turn our attention not towards that which we see but to those things which are not seen (2 Cor 4:18). That he may open our eyes, which do not contemplate present realities but those of the future and he will unveil this gaze of the heart which permits [us] to see God in spirit, through the same Jesus Christ, to whom be glory and power forever and ever. Amen.

As one would expect from the Antioch historical approach to Scripture, John Chrysostom did not develop an elaborate application to Jesus in his homilies on Genesis. Noting that, at Jacob’s request, “Joseph visited his brothers” (Gn 37:14), he saw a parallel in Jesus coming to the human race. He immediately blamed “the unresponsive Jews” for Jesus’ death. The only other passage in his review of the Joseph story with a Gospel application is noteworthy. On Gn 45:15f., when Joseph revealed himself to his brothers and forgave their crime against him, Chrysostom asked, “Who can adequately admire the virtue of this good man who fulfilled in generous measure the moral values of the New Testament? ‘Love your enemies, bless them who curse you, do good to them who hate you’” (Mt 5:44).⁴

Very briefly in Gn 37:2, Cyril of Alexandria noted that the 17 year old Joseph reported to Jacob that Dan and Gad, sons of the handmaidens Zilpah and Bilhah, had done wrong. These Cyril compared to those Pharisees who had criticized Jesus: “He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons” (Mt 12:24).⁵

In the Latin West Tertullian used the Joseph story as a figure of Christ in his passion (*Adversus Marcionem* 3:18; *Adversus Judaeos* 10:6-7). In a homily which became one of Ambrose’s treatises on the Patriarchs, the Bishop of Milan saw many parallels between the sufferings of Joseph and the passion of Jesus. He also pointed to the dreams of Joseph (Gen 37:5-9) as unfulfilled until Jesus came, “Who is he before whom parents and brothers bowed down to the ground but Jesus Christ?” This took place when the 12 Apostles worshipped the risen Lord. Jacob rebuked Joseph for what seemed to be boastfulness. Ambrose asked: “What is the meaning of the father’s reproach but the hardness of the people of Israel? Christ comes to them according to the flesh, but today they do not believe that he is God and are not willing to bow down to him as their Lord, because they know that he was born among themselves.”

Like Chrysostom, Ambrose praised Joseph for pardoning his brothers. However, neither referred to the words of Jesus: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:24).

⁴ For an important parallel study of John Chrysostom, See Demetrios E. Tonias, *Abraham in the Works of John Chrysostom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

⁵ For Ephrem (died 373) and other Church Fathers, see Paul-Marie Guillaume, “Joseph, patriarche,” *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* 8 (1974) c. 1280-85.

The traders who purchased Joseph were bringing balm and spices to Egypt (Gn 37:25). This led Ambrose to remark: “The Synagogue has not been healed, because that balm has passed to the Church. The traders came from Gilead, i.e. from their possession of or dwelling in the Law, and brought their wares to the Church, so that this balm might heal the sins of the nations.” The idea that the Church replaced the Jewish people as heir of the Covenant was clear already from 2nd century writers like Pseudo-Barnabas and Justin Martyr. When Ambrose defended the Bishop of Callinicum, Asia Minor, in two letters to the Emperor Theodosius, he vilified Jewish worship in terms reminiscent of Chrysostom’s sermons in Antioch about the same time. These expressions of deep animosity come in a time of intense competition between Christians and Jews in Asia Minor.

In the Christian Orthodox tradition, Easter is the climax of a long preparation: 22 days of preliminary observance, then forty days of the Great Fast of Lent and then Holy Week. The Book of Three Odes (*Triodion*) presents the liturgy for this period.⁶

The patriarch Joseph is commemorated on Monday of Holy Week. His innocent sufferings prefigure the Passion of Christ. “Also we commemorate the *barren fig tree* cursed by the Lord (Matt 21:18-20) - a symbol of the judgment that will befall those who show no fruits of repentance; a symbol, more specifically, of the unbelieving Jewish synagogue.”⁷

At matins on the “Holy and Great Monday,” the Kontakion reads:

Jacob lamented the loss of Joseph, but his righteous son was seated in a chariot and honoured as a king. For he was not enslaved to the pleasures of Egypt, but he was glorified by God who sees the hearts of men and bestows on them a crown incorruptible.

Ikos

Let us now add our lamentation to the lamentation of Jacob, and let us weep with him for Joseph, his wise and glorious son who was enslaved in body but kept his soul free from bondage, and became lord over all Egypt. For God grants unto his servants a crown incorruptible.⁸

The triumph of Joseph is rooted in his fidelity to God and the moral order. His crown points to the incorruptible sign of royalty that will be bestowed on the elect as their eternal reward.

⁶ Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware (Translators), *The Lenten Triodion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978) 13-14.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 59-60. On Wednesday of Holy Week, the betrayal of Judas should be deplored, “not with vindictive self-righteousness but conscious always of our own guilt...In general all the passages in the Triodion that seem to be directed against the Jews should be understood in this same way...” (p. 60).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 513.

At the end of matins, the attempt to seduce Joseph is recounted briefly:

The serpent found a second Eve in the Egyptian woman, and with words of flattery he sought to make Joseph fall. But, leaving his garment behind him, Joseph fled from sin; and like the first man before his disobedience, though naked he was not ashamed. At his prayers, O Christ, have mercy upon us.

And the rest of matins according to the Lenten order, with the usual prostrations.⁹

The source of the woman's enticement is the devil; she is likened to Eve and Joseph, bereft of his robe, is compared to Adam before the Fall. Then Joseph is asked to intercede for Christians.

At Compline, canticle nine begins with reference to the burning bush that "revealed in prophecy to the Giver of the Law Christ's birth from the Ever-Virgin for our salvation." The Christ's passion is linked to his role as a Judge. "The Judge of all is led to judgment. He who sits upon the throne of the cherubim stands before Pilate as one accused, and suffers all things that Adam may be saved."¹⁰

From the rich potential of the Joseph narrative as type of the Messiah, this liturgy draws on elements that portray his rejection of temptation and his wise rule over Egypt. The theme of sin and forgiveness within Jacob's family is ignored.

II. Early Middle Ages

From the beginning Christian communities proclaimed the Jewish Scriptures. In this they adapted the practice of synagogue worship so that when the Gospels were declared canonical, passages about Jesus became the high point of the Liturgy of the Word. The lectionaries associated with monastic communities of the 8th century preserve the selection of readings from the Old Testament for Lent. For the most part they were adopted by the *Missale Romanum* of 1570 and are still used. The first part of the Joseph story is proclaimed on the Friday of the second week of Lent. The juxtaposition to Jesus' prediction of his passion make the typological connection obvious for the faithful (see Gn 37:3-28; Mt 21:23-46).

The most elaborate liturgical use of the Joseph narrative is found in a *contestatio* (preface) of the Bobbio missal, dated to the early 10th century.¹¹ No other patriarch is favored with such a proclamation. It is lengthier than the average "introduction" to the canon of the Mass; the last point, about the Eucharistic bread and angelic court, prepare the community for the *Sanctus*. Perhaps it was chanted in Lent in the monastery, but

⁹ Ibid., 516.

¹⁰ Ibid., 522

¹¹ See H. Leclercq, "Joseph," in *Dictionnaire d'Archéologie Chrétienne et de la Liturgie* 7.2 (1927) c 2654-56.

likely, the ordinary faithful would not have followed the long series of parallels between Joseph and Jesus:

1. Christ our Lord, whose type Joseph bears, loved by his father with immense love; in secret hatred he is received by his brothers.
2. His brothers hated him because of the mystery of dreams; and the Jews persecuted Christ the Lord because of manifestation of virtues.
3. He was destined to visit the people by God the most merciful Father; (Joseph) wandered through the wilderness that he might find his brothers, [who knew the shepherds].
4. Christ the Lord preached among the people, so that he might convert sinners from error.
5. (Joseph)'s brothers sold him in Dothan and they plotted to kill [him].
6. The Jews grieved that Christ the Lord in Bethania raising Lazarus and decreed to crucify [him].
7. He was [to be] kept in a cistern; (Christ) was condemned to the custody of soldiers.
8. He was betrayed by his brothers, Christ the Lord by the Jews
9. He was sold in the wilderness for 30 silver pieces to Ishmaelites, Christ the Lord for 30 silver pieces.
10. His brothers sold him into Egypt; the soldiers robbed [Christ].
11. He was given into servitude; Christ the Lord was fixed to a cross.
12. He went down into Egypt; Christ the Lord was hung on a cross.
13. Two condemned men served with him in prison; two thieves were adjoined to the cross with Christ the Lord.
14. Joseph explained the dreams to the condemned men; Christ the Lord promised eternal rewards to the thief.
15. Departing from the prison Joseph was put in charge; Christ the Lord departed hell as despoiler.
16. After tribulation he came into honor; after the resurrection Christ the Lord ascended triumphant to the Father.
17. He distributed wheat in Egypt; he consecrated the Eucharist in the world.
18. He was worshipped by (his) brothers on earth; Christ the Lord is always adored by angels in heaven.

The above parallels in suffering are placed in a larger context, with emphasis on the preaching ministry of Jesus as a search for fellow humans. The malice of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries is stressed. For example, after the raising of Lazarus, the Gospel reports: "Then many of the Jews, who came to Mary and had seen the things which Jesus did, believed in him." The next sentence reads: "But some of them went to the Pharisees..." (Jn 11:45-46). After affliction, Joseph is honored and becomes deliverer of his people. This points to the resurrection of Jesus, the harrowing of hell, the ascension and care of the faithful through the Sacrament.

In the Latin Church the *Glossa Ordinaria* (Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 113) became the common source for university students and preachers to derive insights for an

understanding of the Bible. Usually explanations are not credited to any specific sources; in Gn 37-50 some [lengthy] comments are attributed to Jerome, Augustine and Gregory the Great, Isidore. Many of the passages might have been drawn from a commentary like that of Rabanus Maurus (*PL* 107 c. 624), who seldom give credit to sources.

From the interpretation of Gen 37:2, the *Glossa* made Joseph a figure pointing to Jesus. “Jacob loved Joseph more than the others” refers to Christ, whom God the Father preferred to the rest of the brothers descending from Abraham...In the primitive Church [Jesus] did not reject those who came to faith through the preaching of false apostles, signified by Jacob’s maid-servants, whom he did not forbid when they performed miracles in his Name” (see Lk 9:49-50, giving the principle “He who is not against us is for us”):

Gn 37:12 ff. “Jacob sent his son that he might care for his brothers; God the Father sent the only-begotten One that he might visit the human race languishing in sin.”

Gn 37:22f. At the *lemma* (brief indication of the text) “They tripped him,” Isidore is credited: Mystically. “The Jews through death stripped Christ of the bodily and many-colored tunic, i.e. decorated with the diversity of all virtues.” “They sprinkled the tunic with goat’s blood.” This false testimony is linked with the witnesses who accused Jesus falsely. “Joseph was put into a cistern; Christ, despoiled of his human flesh, descended to hell.”

Gn 37:28-33 [Isidore] Joseph is raised from the cistern; Christ returned from hell. Through Judah’s counsel, Joseph was sold for 30 pieces of silver; through the counsel of Judas Iscariot, he was sold for the same.¹²

Gn 37:34 “Tearing his garments” [Isidore] Jacob weeping over the disappearance (*dispendia*) of his posterity; as a father he wept over his lost son and, as a prophet over the end (*interitum*) of the Jews (Mt. 26:65). The high priest did this in the Lord’s passion. [But the Temple veil was torn, so that it might prophesy his naked people and show the divided kingdom.]

Gn 37:35f. “I will go down to my son,” [to *sheol*]... a secret place without penalty existed in “hell” before the Lord’s passion, to which the holy ones descended. For none could enter paradise before Christ removed the fiery sword.

Gn 39:7 “His mistress *injecit (cast her eyes)*” [Isidore]. She is a figure of the Synagogue.

¹² Gen 37:28 states that the price was 20 silver pieces. In a Second Temple text Dan and Gad negotiated the price to 30 and pocketed ten for themselves. See my essay, Lawrence E. Frizzell, “[Education by Example: A Motif in Joseph and Maccabee Literature of the Second Temple Period.](#)” In *Of Scholars, Savants and Their Texts: Essays in Honor of Arthur Hyman*, edited by Ruth Link-Salinger and Robert Herrera (New York: Peter Lang, 1989) 103-112.

Gn 39:12f. “Leaving his garment in her hand”.... [Gregory] Allegorically. Because since the Synagogue, believing Christ to be pure man, wished to constrain [him] in an adulterous embrace, he placed the very garment of the letter to her eyes, but he presented himself to the nations in order to make known the power of his divinity. Hence, until today, when Moses is read a veil is over the eyes of their heart, because the adulteress she kept the garment, but she lost nude the one whom she held evilly.

Berengosus (d. 1125), Abbot of St. Maxim Abbey in Trier, wrote *De Lauda et Inventione Sanctae Crucis* (P.L. 160 c. 935-1036), using Joseph, Isaac and Moses as types of Christ. He linked this traditional typology to the finding of the true cross by St. Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine.¹³

Book I:

1. Having the Law and Prophets before him, the Lord was born and, suffering, ascended the tree of the Cross.
2. The reign of the Cross, founded by Queen Helena, first hidden by the Jews.
3. Joseph is compared to the Wood, his brothers to the Synagogue of the Jews.
4. Joseph was freed from prison, Christ from death; thus the sign of the Cross was freed from seclusion.
5. As Joseph was bejeweled by Pharaoh, so the Wood of the Cross was adorned by Helena with gems and gold.
6. Joseph sold the wheat of Egypt, opening the king’s granary; so Helena merited to open the Cross to the Church.
7. As Joseph hid the cup in his younger brother’s sack, so the Jews hid the Lord’s Wood.

Berengosus then used the stories of Isaac and Moses to develop the references to the Cross hidden by the Jews until it was discovered by Helena. “Whatever we have proposed concerning Joseph, Isaac and Moses is to be considered the Word of God, efficacious and living” (c 952).

To understand this text, one must review legends about the Empress Helena’s discovery of the true Cross. One version recalls a vision of Constantine on the Danube in the seventh year of his reign, which led Helena to Jerusalem where she questioned certain Jews about the hiding place of the Cross. Judah refused to cooperate and was thrown into a pit for seven days. Afterwards, he prayed in Hebrew; three crosses were found. Each was touched to the body of a recently deceased person. The cross that revives the person

¹³ On earlier history, see H.A. Drake, “Eusebius on the True Cross,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36 (1985) 1-22; Josef Vogt, “Helena Augusta, the Cross and the Jews,” *Classical Folia* 31 (1977) 141-151.

is honored. Judah was baptized with the name Cyriacus and Helena arranged for him to become bishop of Jerusalem.¹⁴

III. Conclusion

The simplistic and consistent presentation of the Jewish people as opponents of Christ and the generalized accusation that all were involved in the persecution and trials of Jesus has been rejected by the Second Vatican Council (*Nostra Aetate* #4). The stark contrasts that marred the teachings of Christian teachers in past ages remind us of exaggerations that wreaked havoc on Jewish minorities in Christian societies of both Greek and Latin liturgical heritage. When Paul referred to the Exodus and episodes in the wilderness wandering (1 Cor 10:1-3), he drew upon the Jewish liturgical tradition to relate past events to the needs of God's people in every age. "Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come" (10:11). There are important lessons in every part of the Sacred Scripture for both Jewish and Christian communities today. Reviewing the past together, we can learn from each other in a renewed reflection on the perennial principles and spiritual values in the Word of God.

¹⁴ Syriac: The second version begins with Petronike, the wife of Emperor Claudius, who converted to Christianity and traveled to Jerusalem. She asked to see the cross and tomb of Christ. Her daughter died suddenly and was revived by the cross. Petronike incited Claudius to issue an edit against the Jews. In 49 Jews were driven from Rome. During the reign of Trajan, Jews buried the cross deep in the earth, where it awaited Helena.