

JOSEPH THE DREAMER

by Amy Steedman

Steedman's illustrated narrative of the Old Testament patriarch Joseph, telling his story from his youthful dreams through his trials in Egypt and ultimate reconciliation with his brothers. Part of a biographical series on biblical and Christian figures.

3 Chapters

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Joseph The Dreamer

The Story of Joseph

[Illustration: The coat of many colours.] This is the story of Joseph, the boy who had the strangest and most exciting adventures of any boy who ever lived. Joseph was but a little lad when his mother died. His father, Jacob, had loved that mother more than any one else in the world, so that when she died leaving Joseph and a baby brother, Benjamin, all the love in the father's heart turned to his two little sons. The elder brothers were strong, grown-up men, quite able to look after themselves, and no longer needing their father's care; so perhaps it was no wonder that Jacob made a special favourite of the little lad Joseph, and loved him best. At first the older brothers took no notice of their father's way with the younger boy; but as Joseph grew older they began to feel uneasy and envious. Why should this child be marked out for special favour? Their father took no pains to hide the fact that the boy was the apple of his eye. Even his clothes showed this. While the brothers wore the ordinary shepherd clothing, Joseph had a beautiful coat of many colours. His father had made it for him of different pieces of coloured cloth joined together, and it was so gay and beautiful that every one who saw him wearing it said, "This must be the son of a great chief!" But if the gay coat made them angry, they were more angry still when Joseph began to dream strange dreams, which he always told to them. As they sat around in the fields watching the sheep, the boy would come running to them, full of excitement, as he begged them to listen to a wonderful dream he had had. "Hear, I pray thee, this dream that I have dreamed!" he cried, sitting down amongst them. "We were binding sheaves in a field, and lo! my sheaf arose and also stood upright, and, behold, your sheaves stood round about and bowed to my sheaf!" Another time his dream was about the stars; the sun and moon and eleven stars, he said, had all bowed down before him. This was really more than his brothers could bear. Did he really think he was going to rule over them? Were they to bow down before this boasting boy in his fine coat? Even his father did not quite approve of these dreams. But Joseph had not really meant to boast. It was the wonder of the dreams that made him repeat them. If he was proud of his coat of many colours, it was only because it was a gift from his father. He was a straightforward good-natured boy, clever and brave, and ready to take his turn in watching the flocks or helping his brothers with their work in the fields. But it grew day by day more difficult to keep the peace at home, and the only quiet times were when the elder brothers went farther afield to find new pasture for their flocks. It was at one of these times, when the brothers had been gone for some time, that Jacob called Joseph to him, and bade him go and find his brothers, and bring back news if they were safe and well. Joseph was now a lad of about seventeen, and this would be the first journey he had taken by himself, so he was eager to show that he was to be trusted, and he set out most cheerfully. After some days he arrived at Shechem, where his father had told him he would find his brothers. But he could find no signs of them there. Unwilling to go home without news, Joseph wandered about until he met a man who directed him to a place farther on where his brothers might be, and at last he caught sight of their tents in a field far ahead. How lucky he was to find them, he thought to himself, as he hurried forward eager to meet them. It was a clear day, and the shepherds' keen eyes could see far along the winding road that stretched out across the low hills towards Shechem. Long before Joseph came within hail, his brothers saw his figure in the distance

hastening towards them. Perhaps it was the gay colour of his coat that first told them who it was, and perhaps it was the coat that reminded them of their hate and envy, and brought back to their memory again those dreams so full of pride. "Behold, this dreamer cometh!" they said one to another. "Come now, therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into some pit, and we will say, 'Some evil beast hath devoured him!' and we shall see what will become of his dreams." With dark looks of hate they watched the gay figure coming so joyfully towards them, and only one heart felt any pity for the boy. Reuben, the eldest brother, made up his mind quickly that he would save him if possible. Only he must set to work cunningly, for those other nine brothers were very determined men. So he began by suggesting that it seemed quite unnecessary to kill the boy themselves when the easiest plan would be just to put him down the pit, which was close at hand, and there leave him to die. (For he thought if he could persuade them to do this he would come back and save Joseph when the others had gone.) Never dreaming of evil, Joseph came on, and now he ran eagerly up to them and began to give them their father's message. [Illustration: "Behold, this dreamer cometh!"] But the rough hands held out to him were not held out in welcome. The brothers seized the boy and savagely tore off his beautiful coat, as if the very sight of it hurt their eyes, and then they hurried him towards the pit which Reuben had pointed out. Then Joseph knew that they meant to kill him. He knew that if they threw him into one of those deep narrow pits there was no chance of climbing up its steep sides, even if he were not immediately drowned in the water which often gathered at the bottom. Was he never to see his father and little brother again? never to spend any more happy days in the fields under the blue sky? It was useless to cry out and beg for pity. Reuben, the eldest brother, who might have helped him, was not there, and the others he knew were merciless. The pit was reached, and in spite of his cries strong hands pushed him forward and over the edge. Down, down he fell into the blackness, until with a terrible thud he reached the bottom. There was no water to break his fall, for the pit was dry. Well -- that was done! The cruel brothers went off to a little distance and began to eat their midday meal. But scarcely had they begun when they caught sight of a company of travellers passing along the road close by. There was a long train of camels laden with spices, evidently on their way down to Egypt. [Illustration: "They sold Joseph to the Ishmeelites." Gen. xxxvii.28.] Here was a splendid opportunity of making some money out of their evil plan. Instead of leaving Joseph to starve in the pit, they would fetch him out and sell him to these merchants. Most likely they would get a good price for such a strong young slave. [Illustration: They hurried him towards the pit.] Perhaps when Joseph heard their voices at the pit's mouth, and when they drew him up and lifted him out into the sunshine again, he thought for a moment that they meant to be kind to him after all. But that thought soon vanished. The Midianite merchants were waiting, the bargain was struck, and very soon a rope was bound round his hands, and he was tied to the saddle of the man who had bought him. He knew now they had only taken him out of the pit to sell him as a slave. Meanwhile Reuben had been keeping out of sight, waiting to return and rescue his young brother as soon as it was safe to do so. Very cautiously at last he stole back. But, alas! when he reached the pit he found that it was empty. In his distress he forgot his caution, and cared no longer if his brothers guessed what he had meant to do. "The child is not, and I, whither shall I go?" he cried to them in bitter sorrow when he met them. With angry, sullen looks they told him that Joseph was now far away on his road to Egypt. Reuben must keep their secret. There was but one thing to be done. Joseph's coat lay there, just as they had torn it off his back. They would dip the coat in goat's blood and carry it to their father. The poor, gay-coloured little coat, all blood-stained and torn, was

brought and held up before Jacob's eyes. "This have we found," said the brothers; "know now whether it be thy son's coat or no?" Did he not, indeed, know that coat of many colours? Had he not matched and joined together each of the pieces? Had not his heart been filled with pride and love as he watched the boy wearing it with such a gallant air? "It is my son's coat!" he cried with a bitter cry of grief; "an evil beast hath devoured him! Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces!" [Illustration: He was tied to the saddle of the man who had bought him.] It might perhaps have seemed better just then for Joseph if he had been dead instead of being carried away into slavery. It was a terrible fate, and he might well have become sullen and hopeless in the strange land of Egypt to which the merchantmen took him. But instead of being sorry for himself, and thinking only of the unkindness and wickedness of his cruel brothers, he made the best of everything, and set himself to do his new hard work as well as possible. If he was a slave he would, at any rate, be a thoroughly good slave. And very soon his master, Potiphar, found that this fair-haired, good-looking Hebrew boy was one to be trusted, and, as time went on, he not only gave him his freedom, but made him the chief servant of the house-hold. Then, just when happy days began to dawn for Joseph, misfortune once more overtook him. His master's wife accused him of doing wrong, and declared he was thoroughly bad. And so all his well-deserved favours were taken from him, and he was put into prison. Even in prison Joseph's quiet goodness and his wise ways made him a favourite. He was the friend of all the other prisoners, and before long he became the governor's right hand. Still it was weary work to be shut up in prison, and he longed with all his heart for freedom, and a chance to win a place for himself in the great world. He knew that Pharaoh, the King of Egypt, was not unfriendly to strangers. If only he could reach his ear all might be well. At last the chance came. There were two of Pharaoh's servants in the prison -- one, the king's cup-bearer, and the other his chief baker, and both these were sorely troubled one night because of the dreams they had dreamt. They were sure these dreams had a meaning, but who was to explain them? [Illustration: "Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces!"] Now Joseph had learned to know a great deal about dreams, and so he listened to these men and told them what he thought their dreams must mean. The chief baker's dream was a sad one. He had dreamt of three baskets which he carried on his head -- baskets filled with the king's food -- but the birds had come and eaten up all the food. "Alas!" said Joseph, "the three baskets must mean three days, and in three days the baker must be hanged, and the birds would come and eat his flesh." But the cup-bearer's dream was a happy one, for he had seen a vine which bore three clusters of grapes, which he had pressed out into the king's cup and presented to Pharaoh. The three clusters of grapes were again three days, said Joseph, and in three days' time the cup-bearer would be once more free and hand the king his golden cup. "But think of me when it shall be well with thee," added Joseph to the cup-bearer, "and show kindness, I pray thee, unto me, and make mention of me unto Pharaoh, and bring me out of this house. For, indeed, I was stolen away out of the land of the Hebrews, and here also have I done nothing that they should put me into the dungeon." In three days all that Joseph had said came true. The chief baker was hanged, and the chief butler was set free, and stood once more before the king; only he quite forgot the man who had been so kind to him in prison, and for two years never once thought of Joseph. But at last something happened that reminded him. Once again it was a dream, but this time the dreamer was Pharaoh, the great king. He had sent for all the cleverest men in the land to explain his dreams to him, but no one could find a meaning for them. Then the cup-bearer suddenly remembered Joseph, and came and told the king all that had happened to him when he was in prison. Surely it would be worth while to try

this man. So Pharaoh sent and brought Joseph out of prison, and asked him if it was true that he could tell the meaning of dreams.[Illustration: He told them what he thought their dreams must mean.]There was no pride nor boastfulness in Joseph's answer. Of himself, he said, he could do nothing; but with God's help he would tell the king all that he could. So Pharaoh told his dreams, and as Joseph listened he knew at once that they had been sent as a warning from God. Seven years of good harvests and plenty of food were coming, and after that seven years of famine, when, if all the food of the good years was eaten up, the people would starve. The warning dreams had been sent so that the corn might be saved up and stored. And it would be a good plan, said Joseph, to find the very wisest and best man in all the land who would undertake to do this. Pharaoh listened thoughtfully, and soon made up his mind. He felt at once that Joseph was a man to be trusted. "Forasmuch as God hath showed thee all this," he said, "there is none so discreet and wise as thou art. Thou shalt be over my house, and according unto thy word shall all my people be ruled. Only in the throne will I be greater than thou." What a wonderful adventure this was for Joseph! One day only a poor unknown prisoner, and the next the lord and ruler over all the land of Egypt -- next only to the king in power. But although Joseph's outside life was changed, he himself remained just the same. He was as keen as ever on doing his best, as brave and fearless in serving God and the king, as wise in ruling as he had been in serving. So when the years of famine came there were great stores of corn laid up to feed the Egyptians, and not only the people of Egypt, but strangers from other lands came to Joseph, the Ruler, to buy food. [Illustration: He felt at once that Joseph was a man to be trusted.] Then it was that one day ten tired, travel-stained men arrived at the city, saying they had come from the far-distant land of Canaan to buy corn for their wives and families, who were starving. Joseph knew them at once. They were his ten brothers -- those brothers whom he had last seen when, as a helpless boy, he had knelt and begged them for mercy. Now they came kneeling to the great ruler, little dreaming that this powerful prince was the young brother they had betrayed and sold into slavery. And Joseph did not mean to tell them just yet. He pretended to take them for spies, and he spoke roughly to them. "Thy servants are no spies," the brothers answered humbly. "We are the sons of one man, in the land of Canaan, and, behold, the youngest is this day with our father, and one is not." Even then Joseph pretended that he did not believe them. No, they must first prove their words by bringing their youngest brother to him. They might leave one of their number behind as a hostage, and take corn for their families, and return to fetch their brother. This he said because he longed to see Benjamin again. The men listened sadly to what the great man said. They must have the corn or their families would starve. And yet how could they leave one of their brothers behind when they knew their father would never allow Benjamin to return with them. "This is just what we deserve," they said to one another. "We would not listen to Joseph when he begged for mercy, and now this is our punishment." "Did I not beg you not to hurt the child?" said Reuben. They did not know, of course, that the great ruler could understand what they were saying in their own language; but as Joseph listened he was obliged to turn away to hide the tears that were in his eyes. [Illustration: Lord and ruler over all the land of Egypt.] There was nothing for it but to agree to the conditions, so it was decided that Simeon should be left behind, and the order was given that all the sacks should be filled with corn, and that every man's ass should be laden with as much corn as could be carried; only, instead of taking money for the corn, Joseph ordered that it should be secretly hidden in the sacks, each man's money in his sack of corn. So the men started off on their journey home, and travelling all day came at night to an inn to rest. There one of the men opened his sack to give his ass some

food. What, then, was his surprise to find his bundle of money tied up in the mouth of his sack! The other brothers gathered round and looked on in amazement. Yes, it was quite true. There was the money which was the price of the corn -- not a penny of it taken! What could it mean? But they were still more amazed when at last they came to their journey's end and found, when they opened their sacks, that all their money had been returned. There was a bundle of money in each sack! It was so strange that they grew uneasy and frightened. Then, too, they were obliged to tell their father that Simeon had been left behind as a hostage, and that the great lord of the country had taken them for spies, and had demanded that Benjamin should return with them before he would believe their story. But Jacob would not hear of parting with his youngest son. Had he not lost two sons already, first his beloved Joseph, and now Simeon? "Will you also take Benjamin from me?" he asked. "All these things are against me!" In vain Reuben promised that he would bring Benjamin safely back. Jacob only shook his head. "My son shall not go down with you," he said. "His brother is dead, and he is left alone. If mischief befall him by the way in the which ye go, then shall ye bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave!" [Illustration: There was the money which was the price of the corn.] Now that was all very well while the corn lasted; but when the famine still went on, and all the corn was eaten up, there was nothing to be done but to go back to Egypt and try to buy some more. And it was no use going without Benjamin, for had not the great lord of the country declared, "Ye shall not see my face except your brother be with you." So at last Jacob was obliged to let his precious son go with his brothers, although it almost broke his heart to part with him. Now Joseph had been quite sure that his brothers would return, and when at last they appeared he was overjoyed to see that Benjamin was with them. He ordered a great feast to be made, and invited them all to dine with him; but still he kept his secret, and they did not guess who he was, although they could not help noticing that Benjamin was singled out for special favor. So their sacks were filled again with corn, and the brothers prepared to set out joyfully on their return journey. Only this time Joseph had ordered his servants to put his silver cup into Benjamin's sack. The men had not gone far before they were overtaken by the great ruler's servants, who accused them of stealing their lord's silver cup. Of course they indignantly denied this; but when the baggage was searched the cup was found in Benjamin's sack. Now indeed was their joy turned into blackest sorrow. They must go back at once to try and explain matters to the lord of the land. But would he listen to them? At first Joseph pretended to be very angry, but as he listened to their tale and heard how they dared not face their father without the beloved youngest son, he saw that they had earned his forgiveness, and he kept up the pretence no longer. Sending all the servants away he held out his hands to his brothers, his eyes blinded with tears. "I am Joseph, your brother, whom ye sold into Egypt," he said. "Now, therefore, be not grieved nor angry with yourselves that ye sold me hither, for God did send me before you to preserve life." At first the brothers could scarcely believe their ears. Could this great lord really be their little brother Joseph? And could he really forgive them their cruelty? Then Joseph put his arm round Benjamin's neck and kissed him, and afterwards kissed each of his other brothers, so that they began to feel that the wonderful story was real and not a mere dream. There was no fear of famine for them now. Nothing in all the land was too good for the brothers of the great ruler, and ere long there were wagons and camels on their way to Canaan to fetch Jacob, the old father, and all the wives and children belonging to the ten brothers. They would all now share in Joseph's good fortune. So Jacob's sorrow was turned into joy when the news was brought to him that Joseph was alive and was governor over all the land of Egypt. It sounded almost like a magic tale, and at first Jacob

could not believe it; but at last, when he saw the wagons and heard Joseph's own message to him, his heart was filled with joy and thankfulness."It is enough," he cried. "Joseph, my son, is yet alive; I will go and see him before I die."It was a long journey for such an old man; but joy gave him strength to endure it, and at the end Joseph stood waiting to welcome him -- Joseph the great ruler, clad in rich robes, living in princely state, whose word was law, and who held the highest honors in the land.* * * * *

BOOKS IN THIS SERIES

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