



Joseph and Our Ancestors

Joseph and the African Diaspora

Joseph was taken from his family and homeland and sold into slavery. Joseph's story and the African Diaspora have multiple similarities. This Sunday School lesson is a study of the parallels of Joseph and our ancestors.

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OBJECTIVES

1. Recognize the parallels between the Joseph's Story and the African Diaspora.
2. Recognize African American spiritual contributions to this country and the world.

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PRELUDE

Genesis Chapters 37-50 Tells the story of Joseph, son of Jacob. Joseph has a special relationship with his father, Jacob. Jacob makes a coat of many colors for Joseph. This coat symbolizing the special place Joseph holds in their father's heart enraged them. They hated him and had nothing nice to say about him.

Joseph had a dream, most of us who know Joseph's story believe he should have kept the dream to himself. Nope, he did not, he shared his dream with his brothers. This took their anger to another level. Adding to the situation, Joseph had a second dream. He shared his second dream; this time his father rebuked him. Joseph sharing his dreams could seem condescending or worse arrogant to his father and brothers. Jacob knew his sons envied Joseph. Genesis 37:11 says, "but his father kept the matter in mind." I find this interesting because while on his deathbed, Jacob makes Judah the leader of Israel.

Rueben discouraged his brother from killing Joseph. Jacob sent Joseph to find his brothers. They were not where they were supposed to be. As he approached them, they saw him and began plotting to kill him. Joseph arrived and they took his coat of many colors and threw him in a pit. Judah, taking side with Rueben, enticed them with profit.

Midianite and Ishmaelite merchants were passing by. Joseph's brothers sold him to the Ishmaelites. The Ishmaelites took Joseph to Egypt and sold him to Potiphar, an executive in Pharaoh's Court. After arriving in the Potiphar's house, a sequence of events would take place which would eventually lead to Joseph promotion to Pharaoh's deputy.

Introduction

Diaspora is the dispersion or spread of people from their original homeland.

African American history scholars refer to what happened to our ancestors as the Diaspora. This would categorize us as the children of the diaspora. Like Joseph, they were transported to a foreign land. Our community has overcome significant obstacles to become who we are. Our ancestors were transported against their will away from their homeland. Some chose death over the shackles of the ship. Their example teaches us the value and cost of freedom. The willingness to pay for it, and the importance of remembering our past and not allowing anyone to define us.

Again, like Joseph, our ancestors were thrown into a pit. Our ancestor's pit was the bowels of slave ships. Ironically, one of the slave ships was named Jesus of Lübeck, usually mentioned as slave ship *Jesus*. Our ancestors were taken to their enslavement through the Middle Passage. Finally, the Clotilda in 1860, was the last known ship to transport our ancestors to the United States.

Joseph taken to a foreign land, maintained his spirituality and relationship with God. Our ancestors brought with them their spirituality too. Their style of worship was vociferous, emotional, physical, and quite the contrast to the stoic Eurocentric worship their enslavers conducted. Their enslavers considered it odd or even witchcraft. Eventually, our ancestors' rich emotional spirituality made its way to mainstream worship in America. In a sense, we were Pentecostal before it became popular. Then there was The Azusa Street Revival. It began with a meeting on April 14, 1906, and continued until roughly 1915. The revival was characterized by ecstatic spiritual experiences accompanied by dramatic worship services, and inter-racial mingling. The participants were criticized by secular media and theologians for their outrageous unorthodox behaviors, especially at that time in history.

We can see our ancestor in the story of Joseph. How he was captured, sold and taken to a foreign land. We can see how God had a plan for them. Throughout the history of this nation. Our community has contributed to the wealth and foundation of this nation. Through it all God continues to elevate us. For some of us, not fast enough or not at all. God has a plan, and it will prevail.

Joseph, and Our Ancestors

Genesis 37:23-28, 39:1-3, 40: 7-8 & 50:20

23 And it came to pass, when Joseph came unto his brethren, that they stripped Joseph out of his coat, *his coat of many colors that was on him.*

24 and they took him and cast him into a pit: and the pit *was empty, there was no water in it.*

25 And they sat down to eat bread: and they lifted their eyes and looked, and behold, a company of Ishmaelites came from Gilead with their camels bearing spicery and balm and myrrh, going to carry *it* down to Egypt.

26 And Judah said unto his brethren, what profit *is it* if we slay our brother, and conceal his blood?

27 Come, and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him; for he *is* our brother *and* our flesh. And his brethren were content.

28 Then there passed by Midianites merchantmen, and they drew and lifted Joseph out of the pit and sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty *pieces* of silver: and they brought Joseph into Egypt.

Genesis 39:1-3

39 And Joseph was brought down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him of the hands of the Ishmaelites, which had brought him down thither.

2 And the Lord was with Joseph, and he was a prosperous man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian.

Genesis 40:7-8

6 And Joseph came in unto them in the morning, and looked upon them, and behold, they *were* sad.

7 And he asked Pharaoh's officers that were with him in the ward of his lord's house, saying, wherefore look ye so sadly today?

8 And they said unto him, we have dreamed a dream, and there is no interpreter of it. And Joseph said unto them, do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me them, I pray you

Genesis 50:20

“But as for you, ye thought evil against me, but God meant it unto good to bring to pass as it is this day, to save many people alive.” (Genesis 50:20 NKJV)

But as for you, you intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to bring it about as it is this day, to save many lives. (MEV)

Foundation Scripture

Genesis 50:20

But as for you, ye thought evil against me, but God meant it unto good to bring to pass as it is this day, to save many people alive. (Genesis 50:20)

Background

Joseph is the central figure or, as we would call him today, the protagonist in the book of Genesis chapters 37–50. Joseph was the son of Jacob and Rachel. Benjamin was Joseph's full brother; he and Benjamin were Rachel's and Jacob's only children. Jacob loved Joseph more than his other sons and gave him a coat of many colors and his brothers were jealous of him. Specifically, it was because of Joseph's relationship with their father and not the coat Jacob made for him. The coat was the article of their frustration. In all this jealousy and anger toward Joseph, nothing is plotted against Benjamin.

They sold him into slavery to the Ishmaelites who transported him to Egypt. Joseph's brothers lied to Jacob, their father, telling him Joseph was devoured by an animal.

Upon his arrival in Egypt, Joseph was selected by Potiphar, an official of Pharaoh, to manage his home. Potiphar's wife falsely accused Joseph of trying to seduce her, and he was imprisoned. Joseph interpreted the dreams of the Pharaoh's butler and baker and predicted a famine. Joseph became the chief administrator of Egypt and stored grain to prepare for the famine. During the famine, Joseph's brothers came to Egypt, and he identified them.

When his brothers arrived in Egypt, Joseph recognized them before they recognized him. He had them escorted to the palace. There he orchestrated some challenges for them to obtain the food they so badly needed. His brothers were concerned that Joseph would be vindictive and would treat them harshly. Joseph spoke through his wisdom. *“But as for you, you intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to bring it about as it is this day, to save many lives.”* (Modern English Version (Mev))

Analysis and Interpretation of the Text Genesis 37:23-33 & 50:2

23 And it came to pass, when Joseph came unto his brethren, that they stripped Joseph out of his coat, *his coat of many colors that was on him.*

Joseph was stripped of his coat of many colors, of his robe. Joseph was stripped of something precious to him. Two things, he was stripped of, first, his coat of many colors, second his freedom.

Jesus was stripped of his robe; the centurions gambled for his robe as he was on the cross, slowly dying. (Matthew 27:35)

Our ancestors were stripped metaphorically of their coats of many colors. Like Joseph, they had to learn how to survive in a foreign land. This included learning a new language and customs of the area. They were stripped of their freedom, culture, their language, their heritage, their family, community and their own spirituality.

24 and they took him and cast him into a pit: and the pit *was empty, there was no water in it.*

Joseph was placed in a pit. The Bible doesn't specify how many hours or days Joseph was in the pit. What if he were in the pit three days? Eventually, he was taken out of the pit and sold to the Ishmaelites.

Jesus was placed in a tomb by Joseph of Arimathea after his crucifixion. Though Joseph wasn't in his pit as long as Jesus was in his tomb. Joseph would rise from his circumstance and become a person of power and influence.

Our ancestors' pit was the bowels of slave ships. Ironically, one of the slave ships was named Jesus of Lübeck, usually mentioned as slave ship *Jesus*.

25 And they sat down to eat bread: and they lifted their eyes and looked, and behold, a company of Ishmaelites came from Gilead with their camels bearing spicery and balm and myrrh, going to carry *it down to Egypt.*

The Ishmaelites came from Gilead, a prominent location in the area. It's a land of refugees, a place of reconciliation.

The Ishmaelites were carrying myrrh. Throughout Joseph's journey from the land of Canaan to Egypt. The transition from the land of promised land to the land of

his descendant's enslavement. The myrrh was symbolic of something larger than Joseph. It was symbolic of the death of the freedom of the House of Israel. Its resurrection, eventual healing, and anointed freedom from enslavement to occupy their land of covenant.

Myrrh was one of the gifts the Magi gave to Jesus at his birth. Myrrh was also a primary ingredient in the holy anointing oil used to consecrate the Tabernacle, the Ark, and Jesus's body. Myrrh is symbolic of death, suffering, and affliction.

Like the Israelites, our ancestors endured hardship and suffering after being captured and sold into slavery. They were taken from their land of promise to a place of suffering, hardship, death, and very little joy. Through it all, our ancestors did not lose faith in God. In their captured state, some would continue to worship when they came to the topside. They would pray and dance to God as they knew God.

26²⁶ And Judah said unto his brethren, "What profit is it if we slay our brother and conceal his blood?"

If it were not for Judah, his brothers might have killed Joseph outright. Judah used cunning to save his brother's life. A living being brought more opportunities than a dead body. He said, "what profit is if we slay our brother?".

Judah was cunning, he persuaded or discouraged his brothers from killing Joseph. If this was a safari, Joseph would have been considered prey.

Caiaphas, like Judas, was cunning, he pursued the other high priest and religious elite to plot to kill Jesus. Jesus' popularity and ability to do miracles reduced their influence and power.

Our ancestor's enslavers had the same financial motivation, it was about the money. They purposely kept captured ancestors alive during their journey. Some were forced fed when they attempted to starve themselves to death.

27 Come, and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him; for he is our brother *and* our flesh. And his brethren were content.

The brothers would have to deal with remorse, guilt, and shame if they killed Joseph. To sell Joseph, by far, was the best of the two choices. If Rueben's actions are an outward demonstration of the anguish they felt, murdering Joseph would have been a heavier burden to bear for a lifetime..

In this scenario, it is obvious they did not want Joseph's blood on their hands. It reminds us of the interactions of Pontius Pilate and Jesus. Pilate said, "I am innocent of the blood of this just Person."

28 Then there passed by Midianites merchantmen; and they drew and lifted Joseph out of the pit and sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty *pieces* of silver: and they brought Joseph into Egypt.

Joseph was sold for 20 pieces of silver. Joseph was sold; Benjamin was not there and surely; they would not tell Benjamin the truth in fear he would tell their father. For two pieces of silver apiece they sold their brother Joseph.

Judas betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. Joseph's life is a foreshadowing of the life of Jesus Christ. They were both betrayed, both suffered, both were cast into a pit (symbolic of death), and both were resurrected to a higher status.

At this point, Joseph's brothers violated Mosaic Law as written in Leviticus 24:42; they sold their brother. The Ishmaelites are in the same category as the British, Portuguese, French and other Colonizers who bought and sold human beings. Earlier, it was noted Joseph's brothers violated Leviticus 24:42. Let's take it a step further: they also went against God's command in Genesis 1:28.

Our enslaved ancestors empathized with Jesus. Learning Jesus was betrayed for 30 pieces of silver possibly gave them something to identify with and empathize with. Being sold and shipped from one plantation to the next was not a good feeling.

Consider this, Rueben, Joseph's brother, returns after Joseph is sold. He is in agony. Maybe this is how our enslaved ancestor's families felt when they discovered their sons, daughters, brothers, mothers, and fathers were taken. They were in agony and despair due to the loss of loved ones.

Genesis 39:1-3

1 And Joseph was brought down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him of the hands of the Ishmaelites, which had brought him down thither.

Taken from his home in Canaan to Egypt Joseph is selected by Potiphar- a high ranking official in the Egyptian empire. Joseph was a common transaction of human trafficking. He is sold to Potiphar. God orchestrated Joseph's placement in Potiphar's house.

Jesus was presented to high official, Pontius Pilate. Jesus was led before Pontius Pilate. The same Jewish leaders who brought Jesus to Pontius refused to enter the praetorium, to stay ceremonially clean for Passover. Both Jesus and Joseph were brought before high officials.

The first officials our ancestors would see were the people who violated their humanity by inspecting them as though they were cattle. A result of these inspections would be tied to their destiny.

2 And the Lord was with Joseph, and he was a prosperous man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian. 3 And his master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord made all that he did to prosper in his hand.

He was given an opportunity to ascend. Joseph was handsome; he was good-looking, the bible calls it 'comely.' He was irresistible to Potiphar's wife; she accused him of sexual assault. Potiphar, having his doubts, places Joseph in prison. This was an overwhelming act of mercy on Potiphar's part. According to customs of that day and time, Joseph should have been executed.

Jesus was challenged by Satan while in the desert. Luckily for us Jesus said, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.'" (Matthew 4:10)

In the International Museum of African American History in Charleston, SC there is an exhibit concerning rice farming in South Carolina. They were captured, taken to South Carolina and forced to grow rice. This exhibit revealed enslavers targeted certain parts of Africa for its population's expertise in agriculture and other skills.

Genesis 40:7-8

7 So he asked Pharaoh's officers who *were* with him in the custody of his lord's house, saying, "Why do you look *so* sad today?" 8 And they said unto him, we have dreamed a dream, and there is no interpreter of it. And Joseph said unto them, do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me them, I pray you

Pharaoh's officers had dreams they could not understand or interpret. Notice how Joseph honored God before attempting to interpret the dream. Joseph had an intimate relationship with God. We observed a glimpse of this when he repelled Potiphar's wife's advances. Joseph said, "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"

Later in Genesis chapter 41, Pharaoh had disturbing dreams and asks, is there is one who could interpret his dream? The butler suddenly remembers Joseph. Joseph was summoned to Pharaoh and Joseph interpreted the dream. Pharaoh was pleased with Joseph. Afterwards, Pharaoh asked them, "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God."

In our history, we have had people who had dreams and visions. Nat Turner, in 1821, ran away from his enslaver, returning after 30 days due to a vision in which the Spirit told him to "*return to the service of my earthly master.*". Nat Turner had another vision. On May 12, 1828, His vision motivated him to start an armed rebellion.

Underground railroad leader Harriet Tubman- believed her visions were messages from God, and that they protected her and guided her.

Historians and medical professionals attempt to discredit Nat Turner's and Harriet Tubman's visions and diagnose it as a medical or psychological problem. Do we ever hear the prophets of the Old Testament are debunked to a medical malady? Who questions Moses and the burning bush, or Daniel his visions?

Genesis 50:20

“But as for you, ye thought evil against me, but God meant it unto good to bring to pass as it is this day, to save many people alive.” (Genesis 50:20 KJV)

In his reconciliation with his brothers, Joseph said he knew what they intended to do, but God had other plans. God planned to use Joseph to save the lives of a nation, out of which would emerge a great nation.

Likewise, our ancestors were the seeds the Lord planted, which grew and provided the support this country needed in times of peril. As we reflect on our history, we can see the parallels with Joseph and our ancestors. They were brought here against their will, they were sold to the highest bidder, they were mistreated and abuse. Despite all of abuse they still supported this nation. Consider these facts.

- **Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797)** published *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, laying the foundations for new genres of literature and new ways of understanding the experiences of enslaved people.
- **Onesimus the enslaved-** A West African was purchased for the prominent Puritan minister Cotton Mather by his congregation. He demonstrated a way to keep people from getting smallpox. Even though Onesimus introduce inoculations to the U.S. in 1716. Until recently Edward Jenner was in given credit for beginning inoculations in 1800.
- **Dr. Charles Drew** developed a procedure to preserve blood. His procedure saved the lives of billions of people.
- **The 761st Tank Battalion-** during World War II, General Patton famously ordered the 761st Tank Battalion (also known as the "Black Panthers"), to man checkpoints along the front lines. The Black soldiers made it easier to identify German imposters who infiltrated convoy routes and misdirected them.
- **Dr. Ralph Bunche** He was the first African American to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. He received it in 1950 for negotiating a cease-fire

armistice between Israelis and Arabs during the war which followed the creation of the state of Israel in 1948.

- **Muhammad Ali, in 1985** did something the Reagan Administration could not do, or may would not do. He negotiated the release American hostages. Ali traveled to Iraq, where 15 Americans were being held hostage by Saddam Hussein in the run-up to the Gulf War.

I. Questions

Application

We see our ancestors in the story of Josphe. He was captured, sold and taken to a foreign land. How do we apply this to our everyday living. Remember our own history and our origins. Remember what our ancestors had to endure for us to be here today. When times are tough, we are encouraged to remember we have ancestors who endured on slave ships sailing the middle passage, harsh living, share cropping, and Jim Crowe and we still rise. Sometimes, we need to look back to see where we are going.

II. Take Always

III. Closing Prayer