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JOSEPH IN EGYPT

A Cultural Icon from Grotius to Goethe,
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The biblical stories of Joseph – and its Islamic counterparts – have always been popular favourites. It is, after all, the story with everything: hubris, betrayal, slavery, attempted seduction, false imprisonment, ambiguous supernatural intervention in the form of prophetic dreams, rise to fortune, administrative efficiency, and finally the dénouement with its unmasking, forgiveness, and family solidarity. If that were not enough, the Genesis story provides the springboard for the subsequent meta-plot of the Pentateuch, with the enslavement of the Children of Israel, their release from bondage by Moses, the time in the wilderness, and the conquest and occupation of Canaan as the Promised Land – a saga subsequently re-visited and figuratively re-told by generations of Christian commentators, quick to see their own later histories, individual or collective, in the same terms. Indeed, early modern Europe was prone to see all history as prefigured by a fairly restricted range of biblical narratives. If the Protestant Plantation in seventeenth-century Ireland was fortified by images of the Children of Israel occupying the land given them by God, the Catholics found it no less obvious to see themselves as the Israelites under bondage in Egypt – prompting Connor Cruise O’Brien’s famous remark that Ireland was not so much disputed between Catholics and Protestants as between two sets of imaginary Jews.

If readers have always tended to read biblical stories in terms of their own situations and life-histories, the Joseph story is nevertheless unusual in that it appealed to an enormous spectrum of age-groups and backgrounds. It was Goethe’s favourite story as a child, as it was for the young Voltaire. For many adults it was the archetypal oriental tale, with dramatic reversals of fortune in an exotic setting. For Fielding, turning his hand from drama to the new European art of the novel, and re-telling it with his own twists as *Joseph Andrews*, as a parody Richardson’s *Pamela*, it was the story of the triumph of chaste love over adulterous liaisons. For European Jews – and not just the Disraelis of their times – it was an assertion that though they might have no abiding city here, they could nevertheless rise to political

power and influence. For Grotius, political philosopher and statesman *manqué*, it was a tale of political sagacity and sound administration triumphing over injustice, adversity and misgovernment. Generations of artists had found in the story inspiration for a host of paintings and book illustrations – which, sadly, have not been here well reproduced by Yale University Press.

Lang's knowledge of his contextual field is both compendious and curious. Almost every major example of the use of the story within the two-hundred year period of his choice is described and discussed. In several cases he returns to other near-Eastern versions of the Genesis story with its retelling in the Koran (where Potiphar's wife has a name: Zuleika). Indeed, many of the versions he deals with here draw both on biblical and muslim, and even possibly pre-Islamic Persian, sources, though he does not mention the possibility that the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife is taken from an Egyptian source, the 'Story of the Two Brothers', which has been placed as early as about 1200 BCE. Similarly, his accounts of how much various European writers owed to hearing or reading the Joseph story in their childhood suggests a common cultural background in such biblical narratives less common today. Goethe's childhood, for instance, was intimately linked with the Joseph story at a number of levels. When Frankfurt was occupied by the French in 1769 during the Seven Years' War, the military governor, one Count Thoranc, was billeted on Goethe's father. 'A man of sharp intelligence, he was also a far-sighted administrator who... modernised the old imperial city by introducing such useful things as house numbers, lighting and cleaning of the streets, regular collection of rubbish, and the surveillance of prostitutes; he also founded an anatomical institute for the training of military doctors.' Count Thoranc, argues Lang, could easily be construed as a Joseph-like figure – a foreign governor and benefactor appointed by the king. As a patron of the arts, Thoranc supported the painters of Frankfurt, and one of them – Trautman – created a series of illustrations of the Joseph cycle – even commandeering Goethe's former bedroom as his studio. Perhaps not surprisingly, the precocious fourteen year-old Goethe wrote a epic on Joseph – and even had it bound; not surprising either, is that the eighteen year-old Goethe re-read and burned it.

One of the strengths of his book is its multi-cultural pan-European feel. Lang moves seamlessly from Germany, to the Netherlands, England and France – suggestively weaving together cross-cultural ideas and influences. As the dedication to the University of St Andrews suggests, this is a truly

multicultural work. If one wonders occasionally why a German from Paderborn University should have chosen to write, as he apparently has done, in English rather than German, it is a sign of his impressive linguistic capability that he had the choice at all. His English is flawless, if occasionally quaint. Rarely before, if ever, for instance, has Potiphar's notorious wife been given the pleasantly domestic title of 'Mrs Potiphar'.

Despite his sub-title 'From Grotius to Goethe' Lang's narrative is not exactly historical. Instead it follows a very loosely chronological arrangement within a series of rough thematic groupings. A chapter entitled: 'The Icon of Piety: Joseph for Children,' is followed by 'The Icon of Chastity: the Handsome Hebrew,' with an extensive discussion of sexual mores – both official and unofficial – during the Enlightenment. A chapter on 'The Icon of Leadership: Joseph the Statesman,' includes a fascinating account of how Joseph was claimed by the eighteenth-century Freemasons – a move which led (among other things) to the extraordinary plot-line of Mozart's *Magic Flute*. Aesthetic appreciations are given their own section, 'The Iconic Text: A Beautiful Story,' with an excellent account of how Chateaubriand handles the Joseph story in his *Genius of Christianity*. Against these positive responses is a series of 'Radical Readings' by openly hostile writers who saw Joseph as the origin of absolutism and centralized taxation. Joseph, the founder of enlightened despotism, is an unlikely but interesting way to go down in history. Curiously, perhaps, historical criticism is included in this latter chapter. Also unusual is the visual presentation, in which the works discussed are given extensive plot summaries on a different-coloured background paper. On the whole this is helpful, especially where the texts dealt with are rare to the point of being unobtainable.

One result of this thematic mixture is that the same writers may appear in several chapters, and a sense of any kind of historical progression is largely lost. But it is questionable how much historical progression might be gleaned from what Lang calls the 'story of an icon' anyway. The eighteenth-century development from moral fable, to historical criticism, to aesthetic appreciation of the Bible, though well exemplified in the story of Joseph, is hardly different from the general history of biblical interpretation over the same period.

In an engaging but also revealing postscript, Lang tells us how his book began some twenty years ago 'as a random collection of echoes of the story

of Joseph in early modern literature.’ Many books have begun similarly, but not all betray their origins so clearly. Not merely does this one seem to lack any central focus or thesis, however, it also, more strangely, lacks a real sense of audience. Which English-language reader, for instance, having read about Goethe’s boyhood, or Elizabeth Rowe’s moral tales, needs to be told that ‘Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667) ranks as one of the classics of English literature...’ or then needs a summary of the plot? Or the news that Tolstoy was a ‘Russian writer, best known today as the author of the novel *War and Peace*’? More disturbing is an odd absence of what one might call literary acumen. What, for example, are we to make of the statement that ‘today, for all their literary brilliance, most of Mrs Rowe’s moral stories seem a little dull and dusty’? Surely anything ‘dull and dusty’ is by definition lacking in ‘literary brilliance’?

Some explanation may be found in Lang’s own structuralist and anthropological view of literature. Writing on the Genesis story of Joseph he explains that ‘to decode this message, we can rely on elements of interpretation suggested by Max Lüthi, who, as an expert in European folklore, highlights the difference between folk-tale (*Märchen*) and legend (*Sage*), arguing that each is the result of a distinctive intellectual effort and expresses a particular worldview or, more precisely, its own unique perception of the place of the human individual within society, accompanied by a specific view of the supernatural. The worldview of the legend represents *parochialism*... The worldview of the folk-tale, by contrast, is that of *universalism*.’ He continues: ‘in offering a modern, twenty-first-century interpretation of the Joseph story, I do not wish to suggest this is how readers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries understood it. But while we must be wary of imposing interpretations of ancient texts suggested by scholars in the twenty-first century upon readers and authors of earlier ages, it nevertheless makes sense to indicate how the Joseph story may be understood today. The way we understand the Bible now will help us to measure both our distance from, and our cultural solidarity with authors like Grotius and Goethe...’ What is puzzling about these explanations, of course, is not their ‘twenty-first century’ feel but the feeling of a re-play from not twenty years ago, but fifty: and sure enough, Max Lüthi who died at the ripe old age of 91 in 1991, published his main work (from which Lang draws) in the early 1960s. The assumption that we can confidently offer a ‘correct’ modern reading of such texts is as amazing as it is dated. Indeed, much of what theoretical infrastructure there is in this book belongs to the same period. In view of the work that has been published in

the last thirty years, his implicit claim in his postscript that in bringing together the study of literature and the study of biblical interpretation he is responding to a new kind of challenge also suggests that much of his reading stopped in the '70s – a view amply confirmed by his bibliography, which, while massive, is heavily weighted towards structuralist criticism, and lacks reference even to such basic texts as Auerbach.

As tended to happen with this kind of Foucauldian history, the temper of an age can apparently be settled by citation from a single source rather than with reference to a nuanced debate. 'In courtship,' we are told at one point, 'it was deemed immoral for a young woman to allow herself to feel love for a suitor until he had asked for her hand in marriage.' This extraordinary statement – news, we presume, to Richardson or Fielding as well as Jane Austen – is supported by a single reference to Matthew Henry's *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (listed in the bibliography merely as a 1991 reprint: it was actually published in 1721). That this idea might have been a matter of dispute, or a piece of neo-Puritan polemic against the prevailing temper of an age, is not even considered.

Other minor references reinforce this feeling of detachment from historical reality. What, for instance, are we to make of such baffling statements as that Chateaubriand spent much of his time in exile in London (1792-1800) working in the British Library – again news, one would imagine, to those who thought it dated from 1975 ! Despite Lang's repeated claims that literature must be understood within its historical, social, and political context, this book is better read as a collection of fascinating anecdotes and connections than as the history of the way in which a biblical story influenced, and was influenced by, an age of radical transition.

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