

**To facilitate group discussion, Public Affairs Television, Inc. has created the 175 page *Talking About Genesis: A Resource Guide*. You can purchase a copy of the Resource Guide for \$5.95 wherever books are sold or by calling Doubleday at 1-800-323-9872. In Illinois, call 847-768-7000.**

**Below is an excerpt from the chapter "Exile". In addition to the essay and activities found below, the full guide contains an exploration of the role of women in the Bible.**

## EXILE

### THE STORY OF JOSEPH IN EGYPT: GENESIS 39-47

So it was, when Yosef came to his brothers,  
that they stripped Yosef of his coat,  
the ornamented coat that he had on,  
and took him and cast him into the pit . . .  
Meanwhile, some Midyanite men, merchants, passed by;  
they hauled up Yosef from the pit  
and sold Yosef to the Yishmaelites, for twenty pieces-of- silver.  
They brought Yosef to Egypt . . .  
to Potifar, Pharaoh's court-official,  
Chief of the (palace) Guard.  
(Genesis 37:23-24, 28, 36, The Five Books of Moses, translated by Everett Fox)

Now read the story of Joseph in Egypt in your Bible. (If you would like to read the entire Joseph story, read Genesis 37-50.) As you do, consider the following questions:

- What are the costs of assimilation?
- Do you think that Joseph is a good example of a successful immigrant? Is he a realistic role model? How can an immigrant--"a stranger in a strange land"--both honor his past and, at the same time, begin to build a future? What, if anything, does the Joseph story teach us in this regard?
- In America, some of us are recent immigrants and exiles, but nearly all of us are the descendants of immigrants or exiles. Do you think many of us see ourselves in Joseph's story? Do you?
- What does this story say to Africans sold into slavery, the Vietnamese boat people, the Jews of Europe after the Holocaust, and others who did not choose to leave their homes? Can you imagine what it means to people when they know they can't go home again?
- What was the transformation in Joseph that enabled him to forgive and reconcile with his brothers? If Joseph's brothers had not turned up so propitiously, do you think Joseph would have ever gone home to see his family?

### JOSEPH IN EXILE: A PERSONAL TESTIMONY

by Francisco O. Garcæa-Treto

In his essay, Francisco O. Garcæa-Treto, a Cuban-American minister and college professor, reexamines the Joseph story in light of his own experiences as an exile. The son of a family that fled Cuba, Garcæa-Treto says that over time he has come to read the Joseph story as his story.

I can think of two separate and very different stages in my own relationship to the biblical story of Joseph. When I was growing up in Havana, a Protestant in a Catholic country (my father was a Presbyterian minister), the story was one of many biblical tales which my parents and my teachers told as "our" story, part of the formative lore which any culture imparts in order to shape the character of its young. Like any other young Cuban, I grew up with the stories that taught me civic and patriotic virtue and made me a Cuban among Cubans, reading in school about Christopher Columbus or Jose Martæ.

The Bible stories were another matter--these were always read with the implicit assumption that they were what made us different, what set us apart as evangelicos, as Protestants. Along with Daniel and others, Joseph was a virtuous young man, and the Lord was with him, and that was that. Amidst a popular culture whose best-known expressions in music and dance are pervaded by sexuality, a young evangelico was encouraged to flee from carnal temptation, as Joseph fled from Potiphar's wife. In my upbringing, popular music was suspect, dancing unthinkable (or clandestine), so that to this day I remain a nondancing Cuban, oxymoronic as that may seem. No wonder then, that as I try to recall the Joseph of my childhood, the figure that comes to mind is that of a rather prudish goody-goody, someone whom I both resembled and disliked. I suppose, the more I encountered that early Joseph, the more reasonable his brothers' drastic action of selling him into exile seemed to me.

As for many other Cubans, for me those days have not so much receded into the past as they have been left on the other side of a vast gulf called exile, wider certainly than the ninety-mile span of the Florida Straits. I came to the United States young enough to have done most of my undergraduate college education here, and after that, seminary and a doctorate. Here, I met and married my American wife, raised my children, became a college professor and a U.S. citizen, and now I have lived in San Antonio just over half my life.

The condition of exile and dispersion in which, along with countless others, I find myself, has given me a new standpoint for reading the Hebrew Bible--arguably a set of books largely written by exiles and for exiles--and in particular the story of Joseph. In his book *Santa Biblia: The Bible Through Hispanic Eyes*, Justo Gonzalez, also a Cuban-American, describes the experience of Hispanic exiles in the United States:

We have come to the center, yet we remain in the periphery. In a way, we no longer know where the center is--for that is the very nature of exile, a life in which one is forced to revolve around a center that is not one's own, and that in many ways one does not wish to own. Exile is a dislocation of the center, with all the ambiguities and ambivalence of such dislocation.

Like Jerusalem's exiles to Babylonia, like Latin America's exiles to the United States, Joseph found himself in Egypt as a result of an unwilling dislocation, ripped away from the center that had nurtured his childhood and youth, and placed (in his case as a slave) in the most marginal of positions in his new society. Two scenes in the Joseph story, the incident with Potiphar's wife and Joseph's appearance before Pharaoh, are illuminated in a special way when I come to them as an exile, as one who has come to know this society from the margin in rather than from the center out.

Potiphar's wife, no doubt herself a victim in her position, nevertheless easily resorts to stereotyping Joseph, who becomes "a Hebrew man" and "the Hebrew servant" in her outraged discourse in Genesis 39:14 and 39:17. Later in the story, Pharaoh's butler, who has forgotten Joseph after returning to the court from the jail where Joseph correctly interpreted his dream, likewise refers to him as "a Hebrew lad" (40:12). The exile is an alien, when seen from and by the new center, and exiles know how easily, as a class of aliens, they can be demonized, or relegated to oblivion, or romanticized. (Did the Egyptians have an equivalent of the "Latin lover" stereotype for Hebrews?) I was shocked, but not really surprised, to hear one of the candidates for presidential nomination not too long ago use "Jose" (Joseph) to name the stereotype of the "illegal alien" whom he was proposing to send back and fence out from the xenophobic utopia of his vision. The story of Joseph issues a warning--in the ease with which the strength of character, loyalty, and honesty of Joseph the human being become meaningless facing the accusation flung at "the Hebrew servant"--that one day there might indeed arise a new king over Egypt who had not known Joseph (see Exodus 1:8). Then the pernicious stereotypes would again cause oppression and pain. Exiles, on the other hand, enjoy the problematic advantage of being bicultural, people who at the same time belong and don't belong to two different worlds. Just as I am Cuban-American, Joseph was a Hebrew-Egyptian, and by the denouement of the story he had become so successful in his adoption of his new identity that he could use it as a successful disguise to fool his own brothers. That, however, is just the surface of a much more complex cultural and intellectual phenomenon that all exiles, as hyphenated people, more or less consciously undergo. One aspect of that phenomenon is that, from the margin, one can see things that the center cannot see about itself, and this can work to the benefit of both center and margin. Joseph the slave did not have the investment in preserving his status at the court that probably prevented the Pharaoh's "establishment" dream interpreters from telling him the obvious truth. And

Joseph the Hebrew, who had grown up in the "Third World" of his time rather than in prosperous Egypt, understood the urgency of the warning of the coming famine. When Joseph, therefore, says to his brothers that "it was to save life that God sent me on before you" (Genesis 45:5), he is speaking of the life of Egypt, as well as that of his own people.

To experience the challenge of this narrative, we might radically shift our point of view, as Justo Gonzalez suggests:

It is possible that those doing the interpretation . . . should read the story placing themselves, not in the sandals of Joseph, but rather in the shoes of the Pharaoh. In that case, the text no longer speaks so much about how good people ought to try to influence the powerful, but rather about how the powerful--particularly if they seek to do the will of God--must seek the alien, discover their gifts, and seek whatever wisdom and guidance those gifts might offer.

Joseph's story is a story of exile and alienation, of loss and deception, of oppression and of pain. It is the story of countless exiles, over many centuries and across many borders, who, like the exiles who wrote it and first treasured it, have loved it for its realistic portrayal of the dangers of their situation, but mainly for its affirmation of the hope that their pilgrimage will all somehow turn out for the best, that "it was to save life." And for them--for me--the story is also a story of survival and success, of reunion and reconciliation, in a word, of salvation. Stories such as this remind us also that "Jose" is a human being and not a stereotype, who, given a chance, may contribute more than we can imagine to our common good.

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#### ACTIVITIES FOR GROUPS AND FAMILIES

##### TRACKING OUR JOURNEY (PART 2): JOURNEYS TO NEW WORLDS

Tape a large map of the world up on a wall, give each group member different colored pencils, and ask people to trace the geographic journeys of their families on the map. Track the movements of as many generations as possible, in as much detail as possible. (In addition to moves from other countries to America, think about: moves from one state to another, from the cities to the suburbs, from the farms to urban areas.) Do you know why your relatives in each generation made the decision to move? Did they make the journey alone or with their families? Were they glad to be moving or were they forced to go? Were they able to maintain connections with their places of origin? How did they? Ask yourself: Would I be able to make the same kind of journeys as successfully as my grandparents and great-grandparents did? Would I be willing to? What would it take to make me undertake such a move?

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