

1-1-2016

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John T. Willis
willisj@acu.edu

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Recommended Citation

Willis, John T. (2016) "The Biblical Testimony of Joseph: the Immanuel Perspective," *Leaven*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 4 , Article 4.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol24/iss4/4>

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The Biblical Testimony of Joseph: the Immanuel Perspective

John T. Willis

Immanuel stands at the forefront of Christian thought. This word appears often in sermons, religious books, religious articles, songs, church classes, and common daily conversation. The word *Immanuel* is a very ancient Hebrew word meaning literally “with us is God.” It falls into three parts. The most important element is *El*, which means “God.” God is at the heart of every biblical account. Thus, in the expression *Immanuel*, the emphasis is on God. *Manu* means “us,” biblically denoting God’s chosen people Israel. *Im* means “with,” a tiny but very important preposition denoting nearness or close association. (The Greek equivalent of “with” is *sun* [*syn*], *sul* [*syl*], *sum* [*sym*], from which English receives many familiar words like *synagogue*, “a gathering together”; *Sanhedrin*, “council”; *sympathy*, “suffering with”; *symphony*, “harmony of sounds”; and *syllogism*, “reckoning with.”) The testimony or account of Joseph in Genesis 37, 39—50 emphasizes that God was **with** Joseph at every stage of his life.

Stage 1: Joseph’s brothers sell Joseph to Potiphar in Egypt and Potiphar puts him in prison (Gen 37, 39).

Joseph was next to the youngest of twelve sons of Jacob. When he was seventeen years of age, he shepherded the flock with his brothers. Three things occurred concerning Joseph to agitate his brothers. First, he brought a bad report of his brothers to his father, Jacob. He was a tattletale, a talebearer. Second, Jacob [Israel] loved Joseph more than he loved all of his other sons and thus made him a special long robe with sleeves as a sign of his superiority over his brothers. Third, Joseph had two dreams that he reported to his brothers. One dream was that he and his brothers were binding sheaves in the field when his sheaf stood upright and the other sheaves of his brothers bowed down to it. The other dream was that the sun, the moon, and the stars [symbolizing Joseph’s father, mother, and brothers] were bowing down to Joseph. Because of all this, his brothers hated Joseph and were jealous of him.

As they moved north to Dothan, all the brothers of Joseph except Reuben plotted to kill Joseph and throw his body into one of the pits. But when Reuben found out about this, he pleaded with his brothers not to kill Joseph but rather to throw him into a pit to die and so they stripped Joseph of his long robe with sleeves and threw him into the pit. As they were eating, a Midianite [or an Ishmaelite] caravan from Gilead going to Egypt passed by the brothers, and Judah suggested that they sell Joseph to these traders for twenty pieces of silver. After this, they killed a goat and dipped his robe in the blood, and brought the robe to Jacob. When their father saw the robe, he assumed that a wild animal had killed Joseph.

In time, the Midianites carried Joseph to Egypt and sold him to Potiphar, the captain of the guard of Pharaoh. Genesis 39.2–3 says that “the Lord was **with** Joseph, and he became a successful man. . . . His master saw that the Lord was **with** him, and that the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hands” (emphases added). Potiphar made Joseph in charge of all he had because “the blessing of the Lord was on all that he did” (v. 5).

But a problem arose in Potiphar’s house. Potiphar’s wife tried to seduce Joseph. He replied, “How could I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” (v. 9). But one day, Potiphar’s wife grabbed Joseph’s

garment and begged him to have sex with her. He left his garment in her hand and ran outside. Potiphar's wife cried out to the members of her household and declared that Joseph was trying to seduce her. When she told her husband, Potiphar became very angry with Joseph and threw him into prison. But Genesis 39.21 says that in prison "the Lord was **with** Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer" (emphasis added). The chief jailer committed to Joseph's care all the prisoners and had no concern for Joseph "because the Lord was **with** him; and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper." (v. 23, emphasis added). Clearly, the theme of Joseph's sale into Egypt and being cast into prison is that Yahweh was with him during all these adverse situations.

Stage 2: Joseph becomes second-in-command in Egypt (Gen 40—41).

While Joseph was in prison, Pharaoh threw his chief cupbearer and his chief baker into the same prison because they offended him. Joseph was in charge of them, and both of them told him their dreams. The cupbearer said he saw a vine with three branches that blossomed and produced grapes out of which he made a wine for Pharaoh. The baker said he saw three cake baskets on his head with the topmost basket full of all sorts of baked food, and birds ate out of the basket.

After Joseph emphasized that only God gives interpretations of dreams (40.8), he told the chief cupbearer that the three branches represented three days, and "in three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office." He then told the chief baker that the three baskets also represented three days, and "in three days Pharaoh will lift up your head from you and hang you on a pole." Three days later was Pharaoh's birthday and, as predicted, he restored the chief cupbearer to his office and hanged the chief baker. Joseph asked the chief cupbearer to speak to Pharaoh about letting him [Joseph] out of prison, but the chief cupbearer forgot about it after being restored to his office.

Two years later, Pharaoh had two troubling dreams. In one dream he was standing by the Nile when seven fat cows came up out of the river; then seven thin cows came up and ate the fat cows. The other dream was of seven plump ears of grain growing on one stalk; then seven thin ears of grain sprouted and swallowed the seven plump ears. Pharaoh summoned all the wise men and magicians of Egypt to tell him the interpretation of these two dreams, but they could not decipher the dreams.

Suddenly, the chief cupbearer remembered that during his time in prison Joseph had interpreted dreams. Pharaoh summoned Joseph out of prison, and asked him to interpret his two dreams, but Joseph replied, "It is not I; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer" (41.16). When the monarch recounted his dreams, Joseph said, "God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do" (v. 25, see also v. 28). Joseph then told Pharaoh that the seven fat cows and the seven plump ears of grain represented seven years of plenty for Egypt. The seven thin cows and the seven thin ears of grain represented seven years of famine to follow. Yahweh will cause all this to happen.

Following the interpretation, Joseph recommends that Pharaoh select a discerning and wise man to appoint overseers over Egypt to take one-fifth of the produce of Egypt during the seven plenteous years to store in silos in preparation for the seven years of famine. Pharaoh responded, "Since God has shown you all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you" (v. 39).

So at age thirty, Joseph was made ruler over all Egypt under Pharaoh and wed Asenath, the daughter of Potiphara, a priest of On. During the seven years of plenty they gave birth to two sons, who were given symbolic names. The older son was named *Manasseh* ("making to forget") because Joseph said, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house." The younger was named *Ephraim* ("to be fruitful") because Joseph said, "God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes" (vv. 51–52). And during the seven years of famine, the Egyptians went to Joseph, who was second-in-command, to get grain from the storehouses.

This entire account emphasizes the work of God in behalf of Joseph. Joseph thought he would never get out of prison, but God empowered him to become second-in-command of Egypt under Pharaoh. Joseph remembered his hardship and his misfortunes, but God was **with** him throughout all of his experiences and Joseph commemorates this by naming his two sons Manasseh and Ephraim.

Stage 3: Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers (Gen 42—45).

The famine stretched far beyond Egypt; it also affected Canaan. When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he sent ten of his sons to Egypt to try to buy grain—all of his sons except Benjamin, the youngest. They went to Egypt and met with Joseph. Not knowing his true identity, they bowed down before Joseph out of respect for his position and asked to buy grain. He agreed under the condition that Simeon be kept in prison there until they returned and brought Benjamin with them. When they returned to Jacob in Canaan, they found their money in their sacks and feared that the Egyptians would punish them for stealing the grain.

After the grain was all gone, Jacob told his sons to return to Egypt along with Benjamin to buy more grain. They carried twice the money they had given Joseph before as well as additional gifts and again they bowed before him out of respect for his position, not knowing who he really was. Joseph had a feast prepared for his brothers and, during the preparation for their departure, he had his steward secretly put his personal silver cup in the sack of Benjamin. After they left, Joseph sent his servants to catch his brothers and accuse Benjamin of stealing from Egypt. After much discussion, Joseph could no longer conceal his true identity, and revealed to his brothers his true identity.

His brothers were very fearful of him, assuming that Joseph would kill them because of the way they had thrown him in a pit and sold him. But Joseph assured his brothers that he would not harm them “because **God** and not you sent me into Egypt to preserve life.” In four verses, Joseph repeated the same thought three times:

“God sent me before you to preserve life” (45.5).

“God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth,
and to keep alive for you many survivors” (v. 7).

“So it was not you who sent me here, but God;
he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house
and ruler over all the land of Egypt” (v. 8).

Then his brothers returned to Jacob in Canaan, and told him that Joseph was still alive. Throughout all of Joseph’s misfortunes and hardships, God was **with** him and had sustained him.

Stage 4: Jacob and his family move to the land of Goshen in Egypt (Gen 46—50).

Yahweh spoke to Jacob in a vision, telling him to go with his family to Egypt where Yahweh would make him a great nation. Jacob obeyed him, and left Beer-sheba and went with his family to Egypt, where they settled in the land of Goshen because shepherds are abhorrent to the Egyptians. Joseph brought his father to meet Pharaoh, and Jacob blessed Pharaoh. As second-in-command in Egypt, Joseph provided for all the needs of Jacob’s family (which consisted of seventy individuals, not including his sons’ wives). Also during the seven years of famine, Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh except the land of the priests of Egypt.

Jacob lived in Egypt for seventeen years and as he neared death, Joseph brought Manasseh and Ephraim to be blessed by their grandfather. Since Manasseh was older, Joseph expected Jacob to bless him above Ephraim, but Jacob crossed his arms and blessed Ephraim above Manasseh. Then Jacob said to Joseph, “I am about to die, but God will be **with** you and will bring you again into the land of your ancestors,” that is, the land of Canaan (48.21, emphasis added).

Before he died, Jacob called all his sons before him and blessed each one, telling them what would happen to them in days to come. Then he instructed his sons to bury him with his ancestors in the cave in the field of Machpelah near Mamre in the land of Canaan purchased from Ephron the Hittite, where Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, and Leah were buried.

When Jacob died, Joseph commanded the Egyptian physicians to embalm Jacob. It took forty days for the embalming, and afterward Joseph and the whole family of Jacob except the children and livestock went to the land of Canaan to bury Jacob. When they returned to Egypt, Joseph’s brothers were afraid that he would harm

them because of the way they had treated him before. But Joseph replied, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to harm me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today” (50.19–20).

Joseph lived to be 110 years old. Before he died, he assured his brothers: “I am about to die; but God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob” (v. 24). Then Joseph commanded his brothers to carry up his bones from Egypt at that time. When Joseph died, he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.

A fundamental spiritual emphasis in the testimony of Joseph is that God is **with** Joseph and his people, resonating throughout Scripture as *Immanuel*, “with us is God.” Many Christians think first of the account of the birth of Jesus by the Virgin Mary in Matthew 1.18–25. When Joseph planned to dismiss Mary quietly because he assumed she had slept with another man, an angel came to Joseph and said, “The child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (vv. 20b–21). Then Matthew quoted Isaiah 7.14:

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel,
which means “God is with us.” (1.23)

The historical context of Isaiah 7.14 is an anonymous woman who gave birth to a son in 734 BCE. The prophetic message is that before this child is weaned (usually two years, thus 732 BCE), Yahweh—by means of Tiglath-pileser III and the Assyrians—will overthrow Rezin, king of Aram (Syria) and the Arameans (Syrians) and Pekah, king of North Israel whom Ahaz and the Judeans feared (2 Kgs 15.29; 16.5–9; Isa 17.1–17), demonstrating *Immanuel*, “with us [Ahaz and the Judeans] is God.” This was one of the three **signs** (see Isa 8.18) personified by sons through whom Isaiah proclaimed messages to his audiences: *Shear-jashub*, meaning “[only] a remnant shall return” (7.1–7 and 17.1–8, referring to the loss suffered by Rezin and Pekah during the Syro-Ephraimite War); *Immanu-el*, meaning “with us is God” (7.10–17 and 8.5–10, promising victory for Ahaz and the Judeans); and *Maher-shalal-hash-baz*, meaning “the spoil speeds, the prey hastens” (8.1–4, predicting the victory over Rezin and Pekah).

When Yahweh appeared to Moses at the burning bush on Mount Horeb (Sinai) and told him to go to Egypt and lead the Israelites out of bondage, Moses—trying to excuse himself from this responsibility—questioned, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” But Yahweh responded, “I will be **with** you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain” (Exod 3.11–12, emphasis added).

In order to prepare Joshua and the Israelites to enter into the land of Canaan, conquer the Amorites [Canaanites], and settle in the country, Yahweh assured his followers, “No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was **with** Moses, so I will be **with** you. I will not fail you or forsake you” (Josh 1.5, emphases added).

Later the composer of the Shepherd Psalm says confidently to Yahweh:

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil,
for you are **with** me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me. (Ps 23.4, emphasis added)

We even see this message within the Great Commission which Jesus gave to his disciples shortly before he was caught up into heaven: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy

Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am **with** you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28.18–20, emphasis added).

Although there are several subplots in the testimony of Joseph—strife in the family of Jacob,¹ the significance of dreams, the important move of Jacob’s family from Canaan to Goshen, the deaths of Jacob and Joseph—the main theme is God’s presence and work among his people, especially Joseph, in this set of circumstances. Again and again, the text affirms “God was **with** Joseph.”

JOHN T. WILLIS IS SENIOR FACULTY, BURTON COFFMAN DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR OF BIBLICAL STUDIES AND PROFESSOR OF OLD TESTAMENT AT ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY IN ABILENE, TEXAS. HE IS ALSO ASSOCIATE EDITOR OF *OLD TESTAMENT ABSTRACTS* (WILLISJ@ACU.EDU).



1. George W. Coats, “Joseph, Son of Jacob,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 976–981, insists that the theme is “strife in a family.”