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THE JOSEPH STORY AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN BLACK CHURCHES

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Black Churches and Other Religious Communities

My social location for engaging the biblical text with respect to the Institute's theme is as an African-American male in the southern United States. I am an ordained Elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, one of the oldest historically black Protestant denominations in the country. I am a member of "the black church." By using this term, I refer to predominately African-American Christian congregations and denominations in the U.S., many of which were founded by African slaves and/or their descendants. However, I do not use this term in its singular form to suggest that the African-American Christian tradition is monolithic. To be sure, there is and always has been rich diversity among black Christian communities. To signal this diversity I often will use the term "black churches" throughout this essay.

The black church has a high view of scripture. My own denominational tradition is fairly conservative. Many of its members believe in the doctrines of the divine inspiration and infallibility of the Bible. I live in the southern United States in a region known as "the Bible Belt" because of the conservative and fundamentalist views of scripture popular among Christians in the area.

As an African-American I am a part of an ethnic group that is predominately Christian. According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, the African-American community is approximately 78% Protestant/Evangelical, 5% Catholic, 2% Other Christian (Orthodox, Mormon, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.), 3% Non-Christian (Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, etc.), and 12% Unaffiliated (Non-Religious, Agnostic, Atheist).¹ Likewise as a U.S. citizen, Christianity is the dominant religion. The Pew Forum reports that the country is approximately 51.3% Protestant/Evangelical, 23.9% Catholic, 3.3% Other Christian (Orthodox, Mormon, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc.), 4.6% Non-Christian (Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, etc.), 16.1% Unaffiliated, and 0.8% Don't Know/Refused to Answer.² From an ethnic, social, and religious standpoint, I live in a Christian context as a minister in a socially conservative black church.

I must admit that the subject of relating to other religions is not an emphasis in the A.M.E. Zion Church. My denomination is not a member of any group or organization of interfaith dialogue. In fact, I am unaware of any black Christian denomination or church that has established formal relationships or maintained dialogue with non-Christian communities of faith outside of the academy. Therefore, the Institute's theme while interesting, poses a challenge for my social and religious context.

Israelites and Other Religious Communities in the Old Testament

¹ "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: A Religious Portrait of African-Americans," Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2007. Accessed online at <http://www.pewforum.org/A-Religious-Portrait-of-African-Americans.aspx#1>.

² "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey," Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2007. Accessed online at <http://religions.pewforum.org/affiliations>.

The Old Testament represents the ancient Israelites as relating negatively to peoples of other religions. Various texts depict physical violence and religious polemic by the people of YHWH against followers of other gods. Deuteronomy and Joshua essentially endorse genocide against adherents to Canaanite religions. Passages in Second Isaiah and the Priestly creation account in Genesis 1 denounce the deities of Babylonian religion as false gods.

Another example of Israel's negative relationship with other religious groups is the exodus story. The foundational narrative of the nation of Israel's transition from slaves in Egypt to the people of YHWH is a story about religious conflict. The book of Exodus depicts Israel's God as superior in power to the gods of Egypt. The story of the Exodus can be understood as a violent struggle between the God of Israel and the gods of Egypt for possession of the people of Israel.

After observing the suffering of the Israelites in Egyptian slavery, the God of Israel tells Moses about the divine plan for liberation (Exodus 3:7-11). God uses Moses and Aaron as human agents to battle the gods of Egypt. The Egyptian gods are represented by the Pharaoh who is believed by Egyptians to be a god-incarnate.³

The battle between YHWH and Pharaoh occurs throughout a series of ten plagues. To persuade Pharaoh to release the Israelites from Egypt, YHWH works through Moses and Aaron to inflict plagues that devastate Egyptian livestock, land, and people. In response, Pharaoh enlists **חַרְטֻמִּים**, *chartummim*. Although translated as "magicians," this Hebrew word actually refers to Egyptian priests who are able to reproduce YHWH's displays of power, thus demonstrating the power of Egypt's gods (7:1, 22; 8:7, NRSV).

Despite the efforts of the Pharaoh and his priests, the gods of Egypt are no match for the God of Israel. Eventually, the Egyptian priests fail in their attempt to reproduce the third plague, implying that the Egyptian gods are inferior in power to YHWH (8:18-19). The priests themselves fall victim to later plagues (9:11). After Egypt's firstborn are killed by YHWH in the tenth plague, the Pharaoh relents before the overwhelming power of YHWH and lets the Israelites go (11:30-32).

But a change of heart prompts the Pharaoh to trap the fleeing Israelites at the Sea (14:5-9). To deliver the Israelites from Pharaoh's hand once and for all, YHWH drowns the Egyptian army in the Sea (14:19-30). YHWH'S victory over the Pharaoh and gods of Egypt is heralded by the Israelites. In song and dance, they praised the supreme power of their deity who is sovereign and above all other gods (15:1-21). The story of Israel's exodus from Egyptian slavery presents YHWH of Israel as a more powerful deity than the gods of Egypt. This disparaging view of Egyptian religion involves a violent encounter between YHWH and Pharaoh that divides Israel from Egypt.

However, the biblical narratives of the Pentateuch reveal that the relationship between Israel and Egypt was not always violent and adversarial. Indeed, the book of Genesis recounts that these two people-groups, having different religions and cultures, were able to co-exist and cooperate in peace during the time of Joseph. The novella of Joseph in Gen. 37-50 reports that Joseph's gifted leadership enabled Israel and Egypt to work together to ensure their mutual survival.⁴

³ The Pharaoh was believed to be an incarnation of the god Horus in Egyptian religion.

⁴ It should be noted that the Exodus and Joseph narratives discussed in this essay were not actual historical events. The characters and scenes in these narratives are literary inventions used to make important theological claims about ancient Israel in its biblical context.

The Joseph Story

The oppression and violence of the book of Exodus was not the first encounter between the Israelites and Egyptians according to the Pentateuch. The book of Genesis reports that the Israelites initially migrated and sojourned in the land of Egypt because of a terrible famine that ravaged the region. The peaceful and even prosperous sojourn of the Israelites in Egypt was due to the leadership of Joseph.

Joseph was his father Jacob's favorite son. To show his affection, Jacob gave Joseph a long-sleeved robe, garb fit for royalty. Such favoritism caused Jacob's other sons to hate their brother Joseph. Joseph's sharing of his strange dreams did not help the situation. Joseph tells his family about his two dreams, both of which symbolized that he would one day become greater and more powerful than his brothers and parents. His brothers hate him even more and soon devise plans to get rid of their brother Joseph.

One day as Joseph is coming to check on his brothers in the field, they plot to kill him. In the Elohist version of the story, Reuben, the oldest brother, dissuades his siblings from killing Joseph (Gen. 37:21-22). The Elohist version attributes this intervention to Judah (37:36). Nevertheless, they throw Joseph into an empty cistern. Judah initially suggests that Joseph be sold to a caravan of Ishmaelite traders, but Joseph is eventually found by Midianites who sell him to the Ishmaelites. The brothers tell their father Jacob that Joseph had been killed, offering his long-sleeved robe stained with goat's blood as evidence. Although the narrative has conflicting accounts of the Midianites and the Ishmaelites selling Joseph into Egyptian slavery, Joseph becomes a slave in the house of Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard (Gen. 37:1-36; 39:1).

During his slavery to Potiphar, the narrator emphasizes that, "The LORD was with Joseph" (39:2). Though the God of Israel is not an active character in the narratives, YHWH providentially blesses Joseph to excel in every situation. Joseph distinguishes himself as a wise and trustworthy slave to Potiphar. Noticing YHWH's blessing upon Joseph, Potiphar entrusts his entire household to Joseph's stewardship. Potiphar's elevation of Joseph prompts God to bless Potiphar's household (39:1-6a).

Joseph's success in Potiphar's house takes an abrupt downturn. Potiphar's wife wants to have sex with the handsome Joseph, but Joseph resists her continued advances. During one incident, Potiphar's wife grabs Joseph and tells him to sleep with her. But Joseph runs out of the house, leaving his garment behind in her hands. Using the garment as evidence, Potiphar's wife falsely accuses Joseph of attempted rape. Outraged, Potiphar puts Joseph in a royal prison (39:6b-20).

But even in prison YHWH was with Joseph. God blessed Joseph, and the chief jailer saw that Joseph was honest and trustworthy. So the chief jailer appointed Joseph as caretaker of the other prisoners (39:21-23).

While in prison Joseph also displays his God-given wisdom in dream-interpretation. Jailed for offending the Pharaoh, the chief cupbearer and chief baker have strange dreams that Joseph is able to interpret. The chief baker's dream predicts his impending death by Pharaoh's decree. But the chief cupbearer's dream foretells restoration to Pharaoh's service. Both of Joseph's interpretations came true; the chief baker was executed, and the chief cupbearer returned to serving the king of Egypt. But the cupbearer fails to advocate for Joseph's release as Joseph had asked, and Joseph remains in prison (40:1-22).

Two years later, Joseph's ability to interpret dreams places him before the Pharaoh. No one else in Egypt can explain two of the king's troubling dreams. Pharaoh's cupbearer recalls

Joseph's wise interpretations, and the young Israelite is brought to the Pharaoh to explain the dreams. After crediting YHWH as the source of his interpretive gifts, Joseph explains that both of the king's dreams warn of a difficult future for Egypt. After an initial seven years of plentiful agricultural harvests, the land of Egypt will endure seven years of famine. Joseph suggests that the Pharaoh appoint an official to oversee the storing of food during the years of plenty and the distribution of food during the years of famine (41:1-36).

Pleased with Joseph's keen interpretation and advice, the Pharaoh rhetorically asks his courtiers, "Can we find anyone else like this—one in whom is the spirit of God?" (41:38). Joseph's God-given wisdom and discernment motivate Pharaoh to appoint him vizier of Egypt, a post comparable to prime minister. The Pharaoh adorns Joseph with his signet ring as the royal seal, a robe, and a gold chain as symbols of his authority and status. Joseph is assimilated into Egyptian society by the king changes his name to Zaphenath-paneah and giving him a wife, Asenath the daughter of the Egyptian priest Potiphera. As Pharaoh's second-in-command Joseph will lead the nation through the coming years of plenty and famine (41:39-45).

Joseph prepares Egypt for the famine by overseeing the collection and storage of grain during the years of plenty. Depositories were established in the all Egyptian cities. During the years of plenty, Joseph and Asenath had two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. When the years of famine came, Joseph's work had prepared Egypt to be a source of food for its own people as well as other nations (41:46-56). The devastating famine was ravaging "all the world," or, better, the entire region (41:57).

The famine's reach included the land of Canaan, the residence of Joseph's family. Jacob instructs Joseph's brothers to travel to Egypt to buy grain. Jacob kept his youngest son, Benjamin, with him in Canaan to protect the boy from any potential danger (42:1-5).

When Joseph's brothers arrive in Egypt, they presented themselves before the vizier Joseph to purchase food. Joseph hides his true identity from his siblings, and plays a few tricks on his brothers. First, Joseph accuses them of being spies as a way of getting his brothers to bring Benjamin from Canaan to Egypt. Then, Joseph plants a silver cup in his Benjamin's bag, accusing the boy of stealing. The vizier threatens to make Benjamin his slave, but his brother Judah offers himself in Benjamin's place. Judah's selfless act prompts Joseph to reveal his true identity (42:6-45:4).

Joseph reconciles with his brothers, encouraging them not to be upset about selling him into slavery. Joseph sees a divine purpose in the events of his life (45:5-6). Joseph offers a theological explanation to his brothers for his slavery, imprisonment, and rise to power in Egypt; "God sent me here to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all Egypt." Gen. 45:7-8

Joseph then instructs his brothers to bring their father Jacob to Egypt. Jacob and his entire family move from Canaan to sojourn in Egypt to avoid the famine. Pharaoh allows the family to settle in Goshen, and Joseph provides all the food they need (45:9-47:12).

As prime minister of Egypt, Joseph's primary responsibility is to provide food for to the Egyptians during the famine. He wisely administers the sale and distribution of the stored grain to the Egyptian people by establishing an agrarian policy to meet their needs. The policy stipulates that when the people run out of money to buy grain, Joseph allows the Egyptians to sell cattle and property to the king for food. With the exception of land owned by priests, the people can sell their land to the king and become tenant farmers by paying a 20% tax to Pharaoh.

Because of this policy, the people praised Joseph for saving their lives during the seven years of famine (47:13-26).

Both Egyptians and Israelites survive the famine because of Joseph's wise leadership. The family of Jacob grows and multiplies in Goshen (47:27-28). After giving his last words of blessing and warning to his sons, Jacob dies (47:29-50:14). Nearing his own death, Joseph forgives his brothers for selling him into slavery. He reaffirms the divine purpose at work throughout his life. Joseph says to his brothers, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people as he is doing today" (50:20).

Joseph provides for the needs of his family during their stay in Egypt. Looking forward to a time when the family will return to Canaan by God's grace, Joseph makes his brothers swear to take his body back to Canaan with them. Joseph dies at the age of 110 and his body is embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt (50:21-26).

African-Americans and the Joseph Story

Much of African-American scholarly interpretation of the Joseph story focuses on the experience of slavery. For instance, Phillip Richards examines the appropriation of narrative themes and features of the Joseph story in the autobiography of the eighteenth-century African slave and abolitionist Olaudah Equiano.⁵ Rodney S. Sadler Jr. explores the sale of Joseph into slavery by his brothers as analogous to the sale of Africans by other Africans in the North Atlantic slave trade.⁶

While such interpretations of the Joseph story are insightful and relevant to the experiences of African-Americans in the United States, the Joseph story also holds promise for the practice of interfaith dialogue by black churches. As one of the more positive encounters between ancient Israel and another religious community in the Old Testament, the story of Joseph can be a helpful resource for encounters between Christian and non-Christian groups. The Joseph character in the story may also serve as a model for leaders in interfaith dialogue. As an African-American minister in a historically-black denomination, I will explore how the Joseph story inspires and informs interfaith dialogue by black churches.

Israel's Encounter with Egypt: Insights on Interfaith Dialogue and the Black Church

In reflecting upon how the Israelites relate to the Egyptians in the Joseph story, the relationship is much more positive than in the Exodus narrative discussed above. Israel relates to Egypt in a peaceful and cooperative way that facilitates the preservation of both peoples. On the other hand, Israelites and Egyptians are segregated from each other because of prejudice. These positive and negative aspects of the Joseph story have important implications for interfaith dialogue particularly in the black church context.

In terms of the positive aspects of how Israel relates to Egypt in Gen. 37-50, the two religious groups live in peace. The Pharaoh welcomes Jacob and his family to Egypt and allows them to settle in "the best part of the land" (Gen. 47:11). The work of Joseph has made such peace between these two groups possible. That peace will last for generations until a new king of Egypt "who did not know Joseph" ascends to the throne (Exod. 1:8).

⁵ Phillip Richards, "The 'Joseph Story' as Slave Narrative," in *African-Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush (New York: Continuum, 2000), 221-235.

⁶ Rodney S. Sadler, Jr., "Genesis," in *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures From Africa and the African Diaspora*, ed. Hugh R. Page Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 76-77.

The peace between Israel and Egypt is important to highlight because of the violent religious conflicts present in the Old Testament and in the world today. This kind of peace is rare in the Old Testament as Israel is more often at violent odds with other religious communities. Religious violence among Jews, Christians, and Muslims throughout history warrants recalling a biblical tradition of peaceful coexistence between Israelites and one of its Near Eastern neighbors.

Although religious conflict is not a problem for black churches in the United States, such conflict is ongoing in many African nations such as Nigeria. Over the past two decades violence between Christians and Muslims has plagued the nation. To be sure, the conflict is not only about religion. Ethnic divisions and socio-economic disparities may lie at the root of the problems. Black denominations in the U.S. who operate churches and ministries in African countries such as Nigeria can engage in interfaith dialogue that promotes peace and well-being. Through such dialogue these denominations can also speak to the ethnic and political divisions that contribute to the religious violence.

The peace in the Joseph narrative is made possible because the Israelites and Egyptians had a mutual desire for survival. The devastating famine threatened the entire region including Egypt and Canaan. For Egypt to survive, the nation needed the Israelite Joseph as the Pharaoh notes in Gen. 41:37-40. Joseph's insight and leadership in storing grain during the years of plenty made Egypt a safe haven during the famine (Gen. 41:57). For the Israelites to survive, the family needed Egypt as Jacob notes in Gen. 42:1-2. Joseph's work ensures the mutual survival of Israelites (45:5-6) and Egyptians (47:25).

The famine is a common problem for both Israel and Egypt in the Joseph story. Differences in religious beliefs and practices do not prevent their cooperation to address a common problem. Each group needs the other's help in some way to survive the famine.

The cooperation between these two religious groups to address a common problem can be a helpful example for black churches as an impetus to establish relationships with other religions. Just as the famine in the Joseph story is an international concern, black churches face problems that are global in scope. Black liberation theologian Dwight N. Hopkins offers "A Black American Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue" to encourage Christian ecumenical groups committed to liberation to connect with other religions. Hopkins states that such interfaith partnerships are crucial because the problems to be addressed are international in nature and are not limited to Christian communities.⁷ Social and economic issues such as poverty, racism, HIV/AIDS, and street violence are unbounded by religion or location.

For many black churches addressing such problems is of chief concern. My own denomination, the A.M.E. Zion Church, is known as the "Freedom Church" in recognition of its long tradition of fighting for civil rights in the U.S. Other black denominations such as the A.M.E. Church, the Progressive National Baptist Convention, and the Church of God in Christ have similar track records of leading struggles for justice. But the global nature of these problems is overwhelming and often makes the efforts of any one group seem inadequate. Efforts to address these problems can be increased in degree and effectiveness if black churches join with other religious groups that address common problems. Doctrinal and theological differences need not prevent local and global interreligious partnerships in the interest of liberation and justice.

⁷⁷ Dwight N. Hopkins, "A Black American Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue," in *Living Stones in the Household of God: The Legacy and Future of Black Theology*, ed. Linda E. Thomas (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2004), 172.

While Israel and Egypt peacefully coexist and cooperate for survival, the Israelites do not interact culturally and socially with the Egyptians. The two groups remain separate because of perceived prejudices the Egyptians holds for Israelites.

During their sojourn in Egypt the Israelites were segregated from the Egyptians. At the Pharaoh's instruction Joseph settled his family in "the land of Goshen" according to the Yahwist tradition (47:6), also referred to as "the land of Rameses" in the Priestly tradition (Gen. 47:11). Repeatedly called the "best part of the land," this 35-mile strip was fertile and good for grazing cattle (45:18; 47:6, 11). So the Israelites reside in Goshen, separated from the Egyptians.

Elements in the Joseph narrative indicate that the reason for this separation is prejudice. For example, the Israelites perceive that the Egyptians hold certain biases towards them. For example, the narrator of the story states that Egyptians detest eating meals with Israelites (43:32). Claus Westermann notes that such Egyptian hatred for dining with Canaanites was documented by Herodotus and other ancient Greek historians.⁸ Also, Joseph himself advises his brothers that as shepherds, they should request Pharaoh's permission to settle in the fertile land of Goshen and be segregated from the Egyptians. Joseph recommends this course of action "because all shepherds are abhorrent to the Egyptians" (46:34). Westermann notes that this Egyptian hatred for shepherds might have directed toward non-Egyptian nomads.⁹

Whether these Egyptian biases are historically accurate or not, their narrative effect is to justify why Israelites separate themselves from Egyptians. Although the two groups live in peace in Egypt, the Israelites are segregated from the Egyptians because of prejudice and do not relate to them culturally or socially.

The lack of cultural and social engagement between the Israelites and the Egyptians reduces their relationship to one of necessity that lacks substance and richness. Cultural exchange can and should take place even and possibly especially, among groups with different religious beliefs. Intentional and respectful encounters of other cultures can provide a wealth of meaningful experiences and opportunities. Such encounters can also debunk, dispel, and overcome prejudice and bias.

The need for authentic cultural and social engagement is important for interfaith dialogue. Hopkins points out that though Christianity is dominant in the U.S., most of the world is non-Christian.¹⁰ According to a 2010 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, the global community is 31.5% Christian, 0.2% Jewish, 23.2% Muslim, 7.1% Buddhist, 15% Hindu, 6.7% Folk/Other Religions, and 16.3% Unaffiliated.¹¹

To create serious and substantive dialogue between religions in this global context, Hopkins states, "we will have to see, hear, and listen to different cultural expressions of these faiths."¹² Later, Hopkins writes, "Interfaith dialogue will also be helped when we pay attention to how people carry out their ordinary lives of survival."¹³ Serious connections with non-

⁸ Claus Westermann, *Genesis*, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmann's Publishing, 1987), 294.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 309.

¹⁰ Hopkins, "A black American Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue," 169-170.

¹¹ "The Global Religious Landscape: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Largest Religion Groups as of 2010," Pew Forum on Religion. Accessed online at <http://www.pewforum.org/global-religious-landscape-exec.aspx>.

¹² Hopkins, "A Black American Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue," 174.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 175.

Christian religious communities require an understanding and appreciation for the daily life experiences of the women, men, and children of those religious traditions.

Black churches seeking to engage in effective interfaith dialogue cannot remain disconnected from the lived experiences of other religious groups. Lived experience and religion are always in a dialectical relationship. The lived experience of the descendants of African slaves in the U.S. informs and is formed by African-American religious traditions. The same is true of other religious communities because of the complex interplay between culture and religion. Black churches should actively listen and learn the histories and traditions of groups in other faith communities through dialogue and fellowship.

Joseph as a Model for Leadership in Interfaith Dialogue by Black Churches

The Joseph character in Gen. 37-50 offers insight into how ministers in black churches can be effective leaders in the practice of interfaith dialogue. On one hand, Joseph's dangerous interpretation of the theological significance of his suffering should be avoided. On the other hand, Joseph remains faithful to the God of Israel while seriously engaging Egyptian culture and society. He does not allow differences in religious belief to become a barrier to his service and leadership among Egyptians. Like Esther and Daniel, Joseph is an example for his people of a faithful Israelite who successfully serves in a non-Israelite context. As a member of a minority religious community, Joseph is effective in leading an interreligious partnership with the majority religious group, the Egyptians. Joseph's service in Egypt is a helpful model for African American ministers in black churches who are members of a Christian minority in a majority non-Christian world.

One problem with Joseph as a model for leadership in interfaith dialogue is his understanding of suffering. After experiencing slavery and imprisonment, Joseph rises to power in the land of Egypt. To explain the difficult course of his life to his brothers, Joseph makes the theological claim that his suffering was a part of God's divine purpose in the interest of preserving the Israelite people (Gen. 45:5-8; 50:20). Joseph's words depict a God who uses evil means to accomplish good ends. Suffering is also viewed as a positive and redemptive feature of life.

African-Americans have responded to Joseph's theodicy in conflicting ways. Dwight Callahan notes that some early African-Americans rarely identified with Joseph's "cottonpatch-to-capital-city" trajectory or the sense of divine blessing and purpose running through his life.¹⁴ Instead, African-Americans more readily identified with Joseph's experience of suffering. On the other hand, Sadler notes that other early African-Americans echoed Joseph's sentiments about the divine purpose of suffering as a way to cope with their own experience of slavery.¹⁵ As a modern-day example, I have heard some black Christians say that slavery in America was God's way of introducing African slaves to Christianity.

Joseph's words about suffering are dangerous. As Sadler asserts about Joseph's theology,

"Notions of God's providence at work in hellish situations are dangerous inasmuch as they can serve to legitimate untold abuses in order to reconcile God's justice, love, and power with the worst instances of oppression."¹⁶

¹⁴ Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 112.

¹⁵ Sadler, "Genesis," in *The Africana Bible*, 77-78.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

Theological perspectives like that of Joseph's can be used to endorse and support racist, colonial, and imperial systems that keep groups marginalized.

As black churches continue to struggle against oppression by forging interfaith partnerships, the understanding that God causes and uses suffering for positive purposes is counter-productive to the work of liberation. The suffering of slavery and imprisonment that Joseph endures results from the negative use of human power by his brothers, Potiphar, and Potiphar's wife. God's power is with Joseph in the midst of his suffering, enabling him to overcome and transcend his circumstances. African-American Christians must not interpret their own suffering or the suffering of other ethnic or religious communities as God's will. Such interpretations will stifle the formation of effective interfaith relationships that seek liberation, justice, and well-being for all peoples across the globe.

Though Joseph's ideas about suffering are problematic, the way his involvement in Egyptian culture is positive for his role as prime minister. Joseph's assimilation into Egyptian society aids him in serving as a leader in Egypt. When the Pharaoh appoints Joseph as prime minister, the king changes his name and gives him a wife (41:40-45). Joseph raises his family in Egypt (41:50-52) and is embalmed at death according to Egyptian funerary custom (50:26). Unlike the other Israelites who remained segregated from the Egyptians, Joseph is fully immersed in Egyptian culture and society.

For black church leaders, understanding and appreciating the culture of people of other religions is important for interfaith relationships. Leaders can exemplify for congregants an ability to lay aside religious differences in the interest of learning about another religious group's traditions, customs, and experiences. While Joseph's assimilation is not required to establish interfaith connections, sincerity and intentionality must be involved.

The way that Joseph becomes a part of Egyptian society raises the important issue of identity. In what sense is Joseph an authentic Israelite if he assimilates into Egyptian society? After all, Israelite men were expressly forbidden to marry foreign women in the Torah (Deut. 7:3). Marriage to foreign women and the adoption of foreign customs was discouraged as inauthentic expressions of "true" Israelites in the Persian Period (Ezra-Nehemiah).

On the other hand, the narrator of the Joseph story never questions Joseph's identity as an Israelite. Old Testament prohibitions against intermarriage were based on a fear that Israelite men would be led to worship other gods by their foreign wives (cf. Exod. 34:15-16). Because Joseph remains faithful to the God of Israel as noted above, the narrator never questions his marriage. Also, there is no mention or indication in Gen. 37-50 that Joseph's Egyptian Asenath converts to the religion of Israel.

In addition, Joseph views himself as an Israelite and interprets the events of his life from an Israelite perspective (Gen. 45:5-8; 50:20). Potiphar's wife and the chief cupbearer explicitly refer to Joseph as a "Hebrew" (39:14; 41:12). Jacob is blessed along with the other sons of Jacob (49:22-26). His two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, are eponymous ancestors of two northern tribes of Israel (41:50-52).

These issues about Joseph's assimilation and identity are important for black Christians. Many black Christians fear that openness to the cultures of other religious groups might ultimately lead to the loss of their Christian identity. At a panel discussion on dialogue between black Christians and black Muslims, religious scholar and black Baptist pastor William Turner

states that the fear of conversion and proselytizing is the biggest barrier for black Christian involvement in interfaith conversations.¹⁷

In Gen. 37-50, neither Joseph nor Asenath converts to the other's religion. By marrying Asenath, Joseph becomes the son-in-law of Potiphera, the powerful high priest of the city of On. Joseph remains a faithful Israelite even while he is so closely connected to Egyptian religion. No pressure is placed upon Asenath to leave the faith of her birth and convert to Yahwism. Israel's rules against intermarriage are based on the similar fear as black churches- interfaith connections lead to conversion to other religions. The marriage of Joseph and Asenath disproves this notion. Interfaith relationships can be sustained with all parties staying true to their religious traditions.

Not only does Joseph stay true to his Yahwistic faith, he does not compromise his religious beliefs and convictions. Throughout his ups and downs in Egypt, Joseph acknowledges the God of Israel as the source of his virtue, ability, and success (Gen. 39:10; 40:8; 41:17; 45:5; 50:20). Generations of Jewish people hearing the story of Joseph in and after the Babylonian Exile found Joseph to be a good example of faithful service in a foreign land.

One issue that makes black churches apprehensive about interfaith dialogue is the compromise of core Christian beliefs. Many black Christians think that, in an effort to reach out to other religions, interfaith dialogue means undermining or setting aside belief in Jesus Christ. Commitment and devotion to the person and work of Jesus is a non-negotiable feature of the black church tradition. Furthermore, many black Christians may not understand the value or of worshiping, fellowshiping, or working with other religious groups because those groups do not share their Christology.

Highlighting Joseph's unwavering commitment to his faith as he leads Egypt can encourage black Christians that productive interfaith relationships do not require compromise in core beliefs. Theological differences need not prevent or disrupt dialogue about shared social, economic, and political interests between black churches and other faith communities.

The Issue of Monotheism

Despite all of the reasons black churches should engage in interfaith dialogue, the issue of monotheism may be the most important issue preventing involvement in such dialogue by African-American Christians. The belief that the God of Jesus Christ is the only true God may make interfaith conversations futile in the minds of black churchgoers. There is much biblical support for this belief in both Old and New Testaments.

However, the story of Joseph reflects an early period in Israel's history that is analogous to today's pluralistic world. Before developing strict theological ideas of monotheism, the people of God, like other Ancient Near Eastern nations did not doubt or challenge the existence of deities in other religions. In a region full of different religions with hundreds of gods, Israel simply focused its allegiance and worship exclusively on YHWH. This sentiment is present in the first commandment in the Decalogue, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:2-3). Debating or denying the existence of other gods was not the issue. Israel just was instructed to worship and obey YHWH alone.

In the Joseph narrative Israelites and Egyptians neither discuss nor debate the existence of either community's god(s). These issues are irrelevant. Each community holds to its beliefs

¹⁷ William Turner, "Black Church and Black Mosque: An Interfaith Conversation on Faith and Race Honoring C. Eric Lincoln," March 17, 2013. Accessed online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZ51FYCsLgG>.

while being tolerant of the other faith community's convictions. The story of Joseph is set during a time when tolerance and respect for religious difference was common.

Such tolerance and respect for other religions is important in today's pluralistic world and essential for interfaith dialogue. Black churches need not allow monotheistic beliefs to block interfaith engagement. The black church's tradition of a commitment to love, justice, and liberation should motivate partnerships with other faith communities that share those commitments.

Conclusion

The novella of Joseph is a helpful and relevant resource for participating in productive interfaith dialogue. The national and global contexts of black churches present a myriad of issues that require the unique perspectives and liberating energies of the African-American Christian tradition. To meet today's challenges more effectively, black congregations can initiate and sustain conversations and partnerships with other religious groups.

Historically, the black church has benefited from interfaith connections. During the Civil Rights Movement, the church's leaders and activities were heavily influenced by the work of the Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel, the Muslim preacher Malcolm X, and the Hindu leader Mohandas K. Gandhi. Reviving interfaith connections can help black churches renew their prophetic ministry in the world.

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