

**May 30, 2004**

## **Pentecost**

### **Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings**

Among the stories in Genesis more easily remembered-even if only for being a bit racy-is the one about Joseph's temptation by Potiphar's wife (37:7-20). When the young man told her, "oh no, m'am, this is a really bad idea," the lady took the rejection personally, as they say, and went on to accuse Joseph of trying to seduce \*her\*. Joseph then was thrown in jail, until "the king sent and released him, the ruler of the people let him go free" (Psalms 104 [105]:20).

The tale of Joseph and Potiphar's wife was not antiquity's sole narrative of a young man falsely accused by a married woman after resisting her adulterous enticements. An Egyptian manuscript, for example, closely dated to about 1225 B.C. (Papyrus D'Orbiney, British Museum 10183), records a strikingly similar story of two brothers and the wife of the older brother.

In this account, the younger brother, Bata, lived in the home of the older, Anubis, "as a sort of dependent," who did all the work on the farm. As Bata grew to full manhood, the wife of Anubis began to cast on this younger brother an ever more lustful eye. Like Joseph, Bata was physically attractive. Indeed, the text says, "There was no one like him in the entire land. Why, the strength of a god was in him." The wife of Anubis endeavored to seduce Bata, but he steadfastly resisted her allurements. Outraged at being thus scorned, she accused him of attempted rape. Anubis, of course, believed her.

The several similarities between this tale and the Joseph story are all the more striking inasmuch as both accounts come from the same time (late second millennium B.C.) and place (Egypt).

The theme was hardly limited to Egypt, however. Homer (\*Iliad\* 6.150-168) told an almost identical story of "peerless Bellerophon," to whom "the gods granted beauty and manly

appeal. The wife of Proteus, lovely Anteia, longed with mad passion to lie in secret love" with Bellerophon. Her efforts, however, were wasted on "wise Bellerophon, who discerned what was proper." Like Mrs. Potiphar, Anteia then accused the young man of attempting to seduce her, and Proteus, like Potiphar, believed his wife.

This pattern is found repeatedly in classical literature. Thus Apollodorus tells the tale of young Peleus, who was indicted by Cretheis, the wife of Acastus, when he declined her advances. Pausanias similarly tells of the wife of Crethesus, Biadice, who lusted after handsome Phrixus and, when he rebuffed her, mendaciously accused him. Both Apollodorus and Pausanias write of Tenes, who was tempted by Philonome, the wife of Cycnus. When the young man withstood her charms, Philonome retaliated by charging him with attempted rape. Ovid and others tell the story of Hippolytus, against whom Phaedra, the wife of Theseus, brought the same accusation after her unsuccessful attempt at seduction.

Within the common pattern of all these stories, the names themselves are nearly interchangeable. There is invariably an innocent young, unmarried man--call him Joseph, Bata, Peleus, or whatever--who unwittingly catches the roaming eye of an older, more experienced, married woman. She, endeavoring to seduce the young fellow, is scorned, and in revenge she falsely accuses \*him\* of being the seducer.

Although most of these stories are preserved in mythology where they do not serve an explicitly moral purpose, they can all certainly be read for that purpose, and the moral lesson thus derived is identical in each. Namely, a young man receives the very sound counsel that he must "flee from the flattering tongue of an seductress" (Proverbs 6:24). This is a very old theme in Wisdom literature. An ancient Akkadian text (\*A Pessimistic Dialogue Between Master and Servant\*) refers to such a woman as "a sharp iron dagger that cuts a man's neck." In cases like this, mere exhortations to chastity are not enough. What is required is swift and decisive flight.

In the story of Joseph the theme of Wisdom is explicit and pronounced (Genesis 41:39; Psalms 104 [105]:22), and here Potiphar's wife serves as the very incarnation of Dame Folly, that quintessential adventuress trying to seduce the

inexperienced young man (Proverbs 2:16; 5:2-6,20; 6:24-35; 7:5). As Joseph learned to his considerable hurt, it was in reference to Potiphar's wife and residence that the wise man was warned, "Remove your way far from her, /And do not go near the door of her house" (5:8).

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