

ZAPPY THE EGYPTIAN

A RETELLING OF THE STORY OF JOSEPH

PART OF THE 'ONLY A BOY' SERIES

It wasn't easy being the youngest of eleven brothers.

For a start, I was always given the rubbish jobs to do, and I wasn't allowed to do many of the things my older brothers did. Either they said they didn't want me with them, because I was too young, or Dad wouldn't allow it anyway. Actually, they were my half-brothers, because although we shared the same Dad, we had different mothers. My Mum, Rachael, died soon after I was born and I was her only child. Dad loved her more than his other wife and often said that I reminded him of her. Once, I had an older real brother, but he had been killed several years ago. Dad loved him very much and was heart-broken when he died.

From then on, I was treated as the 'special' son. Sometimes that was great, but it also meant he never let me out of his sight, which could be a real drag. My brothers resented that I was his favourite and although they hid it from Dad, they had ways of having a dig at me, and often did. Their jealousy made life miserable and I missed having a real Mum to hug when I was feeling down.

Dad never got over my brother's death. He kept a special box full of knick-knacks, trinkets, old drawings, carvings and a lock of hair to remember him by. The most precious things were the ripped shreds from the coloured coat my brother was wearing when he was killed by a wild animal. My brothers found it when they were returning from the fields one day. Since then, Dad had never smiled. He had been worn down by too much sadness, losing both his wife and son.

The whole thing left my brothers feeling unwanted. When Dad married their mum Leah, he had been tricked into it by Grandad, who gave him the wrong sister. Eventually, he married Rachael as well, but Leah always knew that Dad loved her younger sister more than her.

We lived in the land of Canaan, fertile flatlands between the rivers and dry, desert hills. Most people worked on the land, herding animals and growing crops too. Life was hard, but we were wealthy and had lots of sheep and goats which our servants helped us to shepherd.

That year, the crops failed because there was too little rain. People swapped what they could and tried to save some seed for planting new crops the following year. The spring had run dry which meant we had to draw water from the ground to keep the animals alive. You had to turn the handle on the well many times, just to get a bucketful of water. Imagine how many buckets were needed to water 900 sheep!

One day, my oldest brother Reuben came home and told us that he had heard that there was food in Egypt. That country was about four days walk from where we lived and Dad decided to send my brothers to get some supplies. Of course, I had to stay at home with him!

I didn't mind really, because I knew my brothers might treat me roughly, if I went along. After they left, Dad and I chatted about old times and he seemed to cheer up a little. I really love it when Dad spends 'quality time' with me.

Eventually, after about two weeks, my brothers came back with their donkeys loaded with grain, oil, flour, fruit and nuts. I had been getting really bored with thin porridge every day, which was about all we had left to eat. Mum had always tried to make sure we ate a balanced diet – she would be horrified by the lack of food.

But wait, where was Simeon? Why wasn't he with the others? Had he got lost on the way back?

Reuben went to see Dad, looking pale and worried! He told him that the Governor of Egypt had accused them of being spies.

"Spies?" Dad grunted. He hadn't believed they were all brothers, nor their story about a father and younger brother back in Canaan. "Liars! Spies!" That is what he had called them, saying they had a guilty look about them.

After two days of questioning, he had allowed them to have some food, but still wanted proof about their story. He told them he wanted to see their younger brother, and had imprisoned Simeon until they brought him to Egypt.

"No! Never!" Dad said. "I will never allow it!" Reuben told him that Simeon was tied up and the man was very serious. Dad wouldn't change his mind and it seemed to the brothers that he cared more for me than for Simeon, but I knew that he was really upset.

Then there was another shock!

When all the sacks were opened, the money they had taken to Egypt was bagged up on top of the food, none of it missing.

"Oh No! Now the Governor would think they were thieves as well as spies!": What were they to do? Nothing was decided that day, or the next, and my brothers weren't happy about it – they wanted Simeon back.

About four weeks later, Dad noticed that the food was running low again. He called the brothers together and told them to go back to Egypt. Reuben reminded him that I had to go with them. "Can I go? Can I, Dad?" I begged.

I was only a boy, just fourteen years old at the time. My name was Benjamin ben Israel – Benji for short.

Dad was visibly shaken. He had deliberately put the situation out of his mind, only for it to come back to hit him like a thundering hammer. He was frightened as he thought again about my dead brother. I was his only child left from the marriage to his lovely wife Rachael and he thought long and hard before he opened his mouth to answer.

“Reuben, it will kill me if anything happens to Benji. I don’t know if I can risk that! I still live with the pain of losing his brother.” Tears welled up in the old man’s eyes.

Judah stepped forward. “Dad’ he said, “we will all starve if we don’t do it. I will protect Benji as if he was my own child and will make sure he comes back safely. Trust me!”

Dad saw he had no choice and reluctantly agreed.

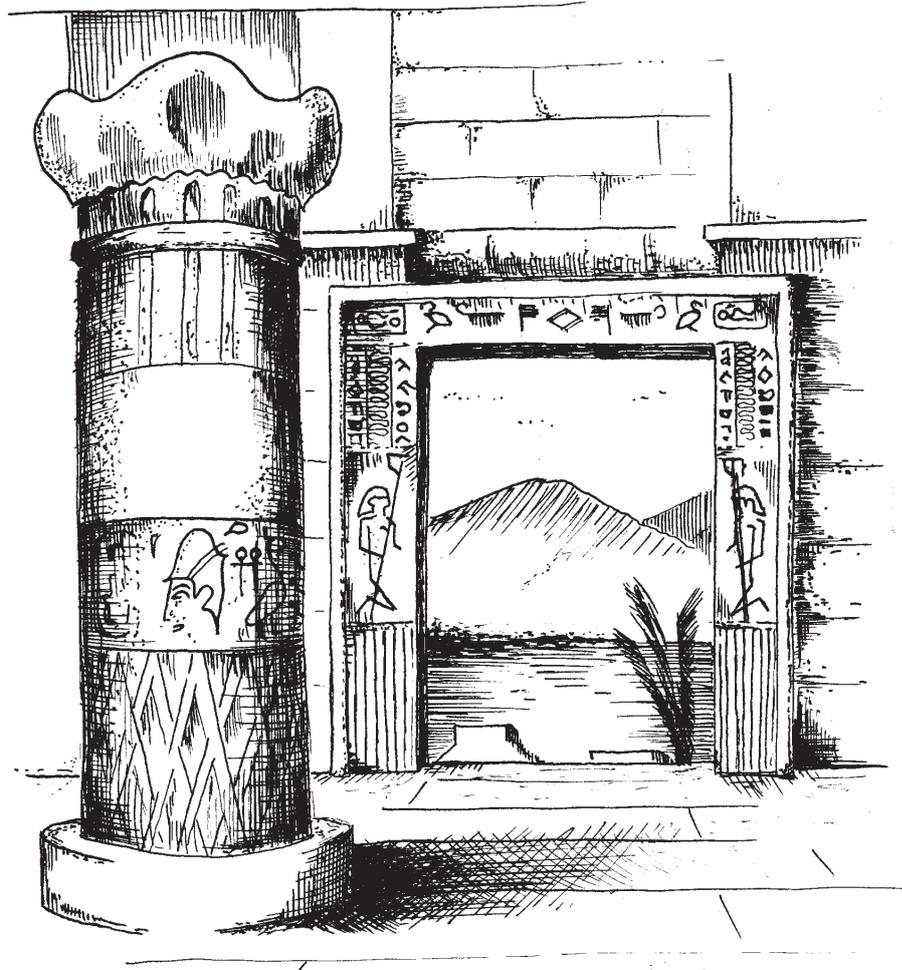
I was excited by the chance of travelling on camel-back to Egypt. I was also a bit scared, because I had never been away from Dad and I knew I would miss him! Quickly we packed all our gear, taking double the money to pay for last time as well as the new supplies and set off. Tearfully, Dad waved goodbye, saying he would pray for my safe return and I kept looking back to wave, until we lost sight of the house.

After four days of dusty tracks, sandstorms and a sore bottom from riding on a lolloping camel for hours at a time, we reached the land of Egypt. We wasted no time in looking for the Governor to ask him to release Simeon, pay him the money and get our supplies.

I had never seen so many people. Canaan was a land of small towns and villages with a few fortresses for protection. Egypt, in contrast, had thousands of people living in large cities with amazing architecture. Even the boats on the River Nile were huge and elaborate compared to what I was used to. Colour and noise combined to make everything very exciting!

It took until early afternoon to get into the food distribution area. The guards directed us to go straight to the Palace, where the Governor wanted to see us. Initially, we were a bit surprised that he knew of our arrival, but we went anyway. Nervously, we waited in a large, ornate entrance hall for him to arrive, hopefully bringing Simeon with him.

The Palace was very grand with polished wood and marble, curtains and elaborate decorations, statues and paintings, some with funny squiggles all over them. ‘If that’s Egyptian writing,’ I thought, ‘I’m glad I don’t have to learn to write it. Handwriting in Hebrew is bad enough!’



From the centre of a large group of servants, the Governor emerged and gestured for us to approach him. He was a tall, muscular, tanned man and he wore very expensive white and purple clothes. He had gold ornaments round his neck, and gold bracelets on his arms and legs. A huge headdress covered much of his jet black, shoulder-length hair and his face was painted, especially round his eyes. The servants bowed low if he looked anywhere near them - he was obviously incredibly powerful. He spoke Egyptian, we spoke Hebrew, so he talked to us through an interpreter.

"So, this is the young brother you spoke of?" My brothers nodded. "He is a good looking boy!" I was flattered, yet at the same time I felt quite scared. Then he spoke to me. "And you, young man, are these men your brothers?"

"Yes your Governorship" I replied. It was very odd communicating through an interpreter, because everything had to be repeated, sometimes several times.

"Then what is your name, and what are theirs?"

Was this a trick question? Why did he want to know our names?

"Benji – Benjamin ben Israel" I stuttered. "Reuben, Simeon (in jail), Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Gad, Asher, Dan, Naphtali..!"

"Israel is your father, and these are all his sons?"

"Yes. Israel." I had already said they were my brothers. That meant they were my Father's sons too. Then I added, "He had another son, but sadly, he died many years ago". At this, my brothers shuffled uneasily. Suddenly for no apparent reason, the Governor shot to his feet and left the room. No-one knew why.

After a few minutes, servants appeared and led us into another room. Evidently, we were to be served with a meal. The servants sat us down in order of our ages. How did they know how old we were? None of us had said, unless perhaps Simeon...

While we ate, I got talking to the interpreter, who was also the head cup-bearer to Pharaoh. He was used to serving drinks to all sorts of people and knew several languages. He seemed friendly enough and was willing to chat. I asked him how long he had known the Governor. What followed was an amazing story of how they had met in jail, several years earlier.

Both the cup bearer and head chef had been locked up, beside a servant of Potiphar, Pharaoh's household manager. This servant was a foreign slave, who told him that he had been wrongly accused and put in jail. One night, both the cup-bearer and head chef had dreams. They couldn't understand what they were about, but the slave explained their meaning. A few days later, the chef lost his head to the Palace executioner's sword, and the cup-bearer was given his job back. Things happened just as the slave had said.

Two years later, Pharaoh himself had two dreams. The first was about sheaves of corn and the other was about fat and thin cows in a river. His wise men and magicians couldn't help him, but Pharaoh was upset and wanted answers. In those days, dreams were seen as messages from the gods, warnings about trouble ahead. That was when the interpreter remembered the slave.

"Your Excellent Greatness! I know a man who can help, if he is still alive. He can interpret dreams. He was in jail with me a couple of years ago. I'm sorry I didn't remember before."

"Who?" said Pharaoh, suddenly hopeful.

"It is the ex-servant of your household manager, Potiphar." Immediately, Pharaoh sent for him. The slave was taken from his cell, cleaned up, brought in and asked if he could interpret the dreams, since Pharaoh was very worried by them.

"I can't" said the man, (Pharaoh looked disappointed) "but God will show Pharaoh what his dreams mean, and put his mind at rest."

He said that the dreams both meant the same thing. In seven years time, there was to be a huge famine and supplies had to be stored up, or else everyone would starve.

At once, Pharaoh made the slave his Governor, second-in-charge in the whole land. The food storage programme started soon after. Pharaoh gave him the Egyptian name 'Zaphenath-Paneah', which meant 'God speaks and He lives.'

"The servants all call him Zappy behind his back, but never to his face!" We laughed and would have carried on talking, but Zappy had come back into the room. He had changed his clothes and had brought Simeon with him.

"Go and get your food. You are free to go." And with that he left, as abruptly as he had come.

"Simeon! Are you all right?" We all rushed towards him and hugged him tight. Simeon nodded and smiled. Then he told us that the servants had been paid last time round and no-one could understand why we had brought double money. They weren't the only ones who couldn't understand! We stood there very confused, but happy that we were back together.

After a while we walked out of the Palace, picked up our supplies, made doubly sure we paid and left.

That night, after a long, hard ride, we camped and settled down to sleep. Suddenly, there were noises and I realised we were surrounded by Pharaoh's guards. Startled, we stumbled to our feet to see what the problem was.

"You spies!" barked the Captain of the Guard loudly, in his rough Hebrew. Oh not that again! "Now you are thieves as well!" He pointed at us all, whilst the guards held their spears menacingly.

"But we paid for the supplies. Here is our receipt!" Reuben protested.

The man brushed Reuben aside, hardly noticing the crumpled papyrus sheet in his hand.

"I am not talking about payments for food. One of you has stolen Zaphenath-Paneah's drinking cup."

"Never! We are all honest men!" said Judah. "If one of us has done this thing, you can kill him and we will all be your slaves." (Judah always spoke first and then thought later.)

"I'm sure that will be true – sooner or later" muttered the man into his cloak as he began to search through our bags and grain sacks. Starting with Reuben, then Simeon, he moved down the line towards me. Nothing, nothing, nothing...

Finally they opened my bags and we crumpled with unbelief as they brought out the cup.

We were stunned!

I began to cry. Judah's face fell with a look of complete horror and he wished he could take back what he had just said.

"I didn't! I couldn't!" the words fought to get out of my mouth. Totally confused, I looked this way and that, first at my brothers, then at the guards.

My brothers were shattered! How could they not take me back to Dad? Judah and Reuben were scared out of their wits.

"Dad will die if they kill me" I thought, too upset to think straight. I knew I hadn't touched it, but the cup was in my bag! Can't we just give it back and leave? I was too scared to ask any of the questions that flooded my mind.

The guards arrested me and took us all back to Egypt. By this time, my brothers had started to panic. They were whispering together.

"This serves us right! What we did to Joseph has come back to haunt us."

What were they talking about? What had they done to him? They always said he had been eaten!

"Reuben, Judah?"

I didn't get an answer, but their eyes were riddled with a look of guilt I had never seen before. Had their jealousy caused Joseph's death? I wondered, now trembling.

"Judah, you promised to protect me. Were they just empty words?"

I was now afraid for my safety, especially since I had just overheard their panicked whispers.

Back in front of the Governor, the questions started all over again. He didn't listen to us when we denied taking it, because we couldn't explain how it was in the sack.

Suddenly Judah spoke out.

"What can we say, Sir? God has done this to show up the evil in our hearts."

That was a strange answer! Why did he say that? Were they still talking about Joseph's death? Did they kill him, after all?

My mind was full of fear, but I needed to know the truth.

Judah continued, "We have a cup but we know we did not take it. How can we make amends and prove that we are trustworthy men? We will be your slaves until you see the truth."

"Not all of you, just the one who had the cup" the Governor replied. "The rest of you are free to go."

"No!" shouted Judah, "I won't allow it!"

Zappy stared at him for this outburst, with a mix of alarm and surprise.

"Sir, you remember we told you about our Father? It will kill him if we don't take Benji back. He is my Father's favourite and I promised personally to protect him, with my life if necessary. So take me as your slave instead. Let him go free. He is just a boy. Please do not inflict this further pain on our dear Father."

My jaw dropped open. At the same time my eyes bulged wide with unbelief at what I had just heard. That was the last thing I expected! Normally my brothers were only interested in themselves.

The room went very quiet. No-one spoke and the Egyptian servants were looking eagerly to see what would happen. What would this all-powerful Governor say? He could kill us all, lock any of us up, or do whatever he wanted. Could he also show mercy?

Suddenly his eyes moistened and his face twisted strangely. He shouted at all his attendants to leave the room, leaving only him and us. The paint around his eyes was now running down his cheeks. He was crying! This was extreme behaviour, but what happened next was totally mind-blowing!

"I am Joseph!" the Governor blurted out in Hebrew, his face awash with tears, his body suddenly very agitated. "I am Joseph! Is my Father really still alive?"

WHA-A-A-A-T????

Joseph was dead! DEAD! What was this cruelty?

None of us could speak! Our legs were shaking and my brother's faces were white with shock. Reuben's eyes looked as if they were about to pop out of his head. Judah gasped and Dan just crumpled to the floor. The rest of us just stared, our tongues dried up in our mouths.

Zappy ripped off his headdress, wiped the paint, tears and makeup off his face and started to speak in fluent Hebrew, asking questions about Dad.

It was an unbelievable moment!

Zappy, Joseph, (whatever his name was) grabbed me in a huge bear hug and cried all over my shoulders, the paint from his face messing up all my clothes. I was sobbing too! Was this man really my own brother, back from the dead?

Then he hugged and kissed all my brothers in turn. Only then did our voices find a way back into our heads and immediately the whole room erupted with excited talk and laughter.

Everything changed that day!

We rushed back to see Dad, to tell him the fantastic news. His heart nearly stopped with a mixture of pain and joy, as he struggled to understand what his ears had just heard. Years of heartache drowned in a pool of tears and the worn wrinkles in his hardened face began to soften as light poured back into his heart.

Joseph told us that the famine still had a few years to run. He said we should move to Egypt to live, to the best area in the land, known as Goshen, where he could care for us.

Dad and Joseph's re-union was simply astonishing! The Palace had a party that went on for days and days. Joseph and Dad had to forgive my brothers. They were heart-broken over what they had done – especially as they remembered what their envious hatred had done to Dad over the years.

They had lived with the fear of being discovered, suffering from guilt ever since and they cried for the pain they had brought into the family. Soon, however, those tears were replaced by a new laughter as forgiveness washed the past away.

Years before, God had given Joseph some dreams of his own and through all his troubles, he had always hung on to them. He believed God would make them happen one day and even when everything else seemed to go against him, God never abandoned him. What my brothers meant to harm him, God used for good.

In fact, Joseph said that it was God's plan all along.

I'm not sure my brothers thought they were part of God's plan when they sold him off as a slave, but through the events that followed, their hearts had really changed.

In fact, I almost can't recognise them.