

“Authentically Sacred, Authentically Scripture”

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Selections from Genesis 37 & 1 Corinthians 13

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This is a story you’ve heard before. A boy, a dreamer, a seventeen-year-old, the favorite of his father, is given a “richly ornamented robe,” his amazing technicolor dreamcoat, called a *ketonet passim* (Gen. 37:3). But, I want to share something that you probably didn’t already know when you came to church today—something that may surprise you. Let’s look at these words again, *ketonet passim*. In Hebrew, a *ketonet* is “tunic or undergarment, meaning a long shirt-like garment usually of linen” (Sefaria 2024). By itself, *ketonet* is used about thirty times in the Hebrew Bible, and its Greek translation, *himation*, is likewise used frequently in the Gospels. The second part of Joseph’s robe, however, (the *passim* of *ketonet passim*) is an incredibly rare and underused word. Rabbis and commentaries interpret *passim* to mean anything from 1) being long and wide enough to reach the palms of your hands and soles of your feet to 2) being “such fine material that when folded, it could fit in the palm of one’s hand,” to 3) being “colorful,” embroidered,” “striped” or “illustrated” (Chabad 2024). Here’s what we do know, though. Whereas we see *ketonet* and its translation throughout the Scriptures, *passim* only shows up twice: once in Genesis 37 to describe Joseph’s robe and another in 2 Samuel 13 to describe Tamar’s dress, the daughter of King David’s dress, made specifically for maiden princesses in Ancient Israel courts. Out of all of the words paired together and used to describe clothing in our Bible, the Scripture writers intentionally, specifically applied the words *ketonet passim* to the garments worn by Joseph in Genesis and Tamar in 2 Samuel. What does this mean? In the

words of Lutheran pastor and author Rev. Elle Dowe, Joseph's father, gifted him "a richly ornamented, long sleeve, pretty pretty princess dress"--a dress Joseph wore proudly.

Did anyone here know that already? Raise your hand if you already knew that connection between Joseph and Tamar. Folks online, feel free to write a comment in the chat, too. I didn't know anything about it until a couple of years ago at divinity school. If you can believe it, there's even more to the story of the *ketonet passim*. According to Jewish and LGBTQ+ historian Gregg Drinkwater, "one midrash [or, rabbinical commentary] suggests that the coat itself was made from the remnants of [Joseph's mother's] Rachel's wedding dress" (2009). Perhaps due to the lineage, Joseph's garment falls into the category of the Hebrew term *beqed*, or, Drinkwater writes, "clothes that impart an image or give significance to the wearer, making clear that this person's actions and role are important" (2009). Indeed, Joseph's garment foretells Joseph's greatness: it honors "Joseph as someone who grows to become *tzaddik*, or [a] righteous person" in the eyes of God and on the pages of Scripture (Drinkwater 2009).

God has chosen Joseph--in his dreaming, dress-wearing glory--to be one of the greatest leaders in the Hebrew Bible. God even gifts Joseph prophetic visions, a unique marker of chosenness and closeness to God. To the rest of his family and his community, Joseph is different in his long dress, sharing easily and eagerly about the dreams that prophesy him as a leader. Surely, his family and community embrace his difference, honoring and celebrating his courageous, strong self of authentic self, right? As you heard from today's Scripture reading from Genesis 37, this is, unfortunately, not the case. Joseph's brothers despise him for being authentically different. His brothers feel

threatened, angry, and, yes, envious. They plot to corner him and overpower him. All but Joseph's brother, Reuben, plot to kill Joseph, their own blood, and throw his body in a pit. They mock him, calling him "that dreamer," physically assault him, steal and destroy his precious garment, and leave him vulnerable, alone, and helpless (Gen. 37:19). If you know Joseph's story well, you'll know that he will be sold into slavery and face further violence, harassment, and alienation.

In *Torah Queeries* (pun intended), Drinkwater writes, "the story of Joseph, the longest continuous narratives in the book of Genesis, offers one of the richest and most detailed portraits of a singular character in the entire Hebrew Bible...such an emotionally complex narrative about Joseph's life that both ancient and modern commentators feel drawn to analyzing and interpreting his every move and identifying with his many trials and triumphs." (2009). It seems almost impossible to me that a revered prophet, one of God's closests, could face such unthinkable damage to his body, spirit, and identity. He endures a violation that no human deserves. Yet, despite the horror, there's something universally appealing about his story. Right along with Noah's Ark and Jesus's fishes and loaves, Joseph's story has been the inspiration for countless illustrated storybooks, children's Bibles, and pop culture moments—of course, including musicals. Why is this? Why is Joseph a story that we keep coming back to time and time again, one that seems to resonate with all ages and walks of life? Why is it, too, that we, as a society, can see God's face in Joseph, can see ourselves in Joseph, but we hesitate to see God and ourselves in the Josephs of our world?

Who are the Josephs of our world, you might be asking yourself? At Joseph's core, he is Other-capital "O." The "Other" is someone who doesn't fit in the neat outlines of social expectations for class, gender, body, ability, race, and beyond. Living like Joseph-authentically, boldly, self-assuredly, close to God, coloring outside the lines, as it were-runs the risk of becoming an Other in the eyes of family and community. Mocking, separation, assault-Joseph's brothers clock him as Other. As modern interpreters of the Bible, we can read Joseph's Otherness through a variety of lenses, but the lens I'd like us to peer through today, to consider, is, calling back to *ketonet passim*, the princess dress he wore so proudly, one of gender nonconformity and queerness. By doing so, by reading Joseph as a queer biblical hero, and therefore also seeing his brothers' attack as something akin to a hate crime, we engage in a scholarly and spiritual practice called queer theology. While the term "queer" has been used against members of the LGBTQ+ community historically, more recently, individuals and activists have reclaimed that word. In fact, you may hear the word "queer" used more often than the acronym "LGBTQ" nowadays. Queer theory and queer theology are actually two very well-established fields in academia and theological circles, and they've been around for decades.

In the appropriately-titled book *Queer Theology*, author and Yale Divinity School professor Linn Marie Tonstad explains, "queer theology indicates theologies in which 1) sexuality and gender are discussed 2) in ways that affirm [and] represent... queer people...that explain why and how Christianity and queerness become compatible" (2018). From the late, prominent queer theorist Marcella Althaus-Reid, queer theology is "about the re-discovery of God...the deliberate questioning of [what] has shaped our

understanding of theology [and] the role of the theologian" (2004). In other words, what can we learn about ourselves, our Christianity, and maybe even our God from Joseph, the gender non-conforming biblical hero Othered in a handed-down dress? How can reimagining the Bible lead us down the path to actually uncovering a more authentic, nuanced reading of Scripture?

[Slow down] Imagine you were Joseph through the lens of queer theology. You are seventeen, a boy that may have been lost in the shuffle of your macho brothers. However, your parent sees you—the real you, the authentic you—and gives you something that will make your heart sing, something that honors and exudes your difference. You wear it proudly, dreaming in it, until that representation of who your true inner self is snatched from you, violated, vilified. You are left alone and afraid—if the people entrusted to care for you and protect you, your older brothers, turn on you like this simply because you're living boldly and authentically, who's to say the rest of the world won't? How do you even begin to build yourself up and trust others to see you for who you really are? How can you begin to kindle the light of your divinity and dignity, your inherent sacredness, again?

In today's world, Joseph's story is all too familiar to queer, trans, and non-binary individuals--their divine strengths chosen by God met with stigma, trauma, and hate. In our church community, we are proudly Open & Affirming, meaning that, for the past two decades, we have committed ourselves to being a theologically safe place for all—a theologically safe place for people like Joseph. Many other spaces, churches and otherwise, cannot claim this. At a time where communities and legislators seek to target queer and *especially* trans, nonbinary, and gender-non-conforming young people, stories like Joseph's

and the stories you'll see today at the Authentic Selves photo exhibit are important reminders that our work in our culture, our work as Christians, is not over. No one, especially no young person, should be denied the right to be who they are, in all their divinity. We believe in a Creator who chose Joseph, who made us good, made us whole, delights in our joy, and cries in our heartbreak. We follow the ministry of Jesus's radical hospitality and welcoming - a welcoming that includes seeing God and ourselves in the Josephs of our world.

Let us remind ourselves: "1 Even if I can speak in the tongues of earth—and those of the angels too—but do not have love, I am just a noisy gong, a clanging cymbal." What are some ways that we can answer the call to transform "love" into an active verb, one that reaches out to, accepts, advocates for, and honors someone that Joseph could have been and could be?

Here's how you can start. Read and watch stories by queer, trans, and nonbinary voices. Respect and actively use correct pronouns and chosen names—that goes a long way. Shake up your own worldview—could you challenge yourself to take up the practice of queer theology when you study your Bible? Be mindful of the higher risk of mental health challenges like anxiety, depression, and trauma when you engage with all young people, and especially young queer people, and the pressure they face from having politicized, sometimes legislated, bodies and identities. Research anti-trans and anti-queer legislation. Refrain from making off-color jokes that could hurt a queer person in your life. Show your allyship by attending a parade or a festival put on by and for queer people. The ways are endless and more meaningful than you can imagine.

I hope you take this interpretation of Joseph with you today and even share it with someone you love who you think could benefit from hearing it. I hope, too, that this passage from Scripture can guide all of us this Pride Month and beyond: "1 Even if I can speak in the tongues of earth—and those of the angels too—but do not have love, I am just a noisy gong, a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy such that I can comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge, or if I have faith great enough to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.... 13 There are, in the end, these three things that last: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:1-2, 13)." But the greatest of these is love. Amen.