

Working for the Common Good: Joseph and Pharaoh's Relationship as an Example of Interfaith and Secular Cooperation

Paul Rauschenbush, responding to the passing of the gay rights ballot initiatives in Maine and Maryland and the defeat of two Senate candidates who believe it is God's will that raped women maintain their pregnancies writes: "the big religious loser last night was the spiritual abuse of power that seeks to diminish the rights and dignity of others."¹ While 78.4% of United States citizens identify as Christian,² there appears to be a shift in the role that the electorate believes that personal religion should play in the political realm, especially when Christian privilege diminishes the ability to work civilly with those who practice other faith or moral traditions. Yet biblical texts require people of faith to interact within the political sphere—the place of power and change—to enact justice or serve as witnesses. So where does a Christian's sense of faith stop being an example and cross the line by trying to dictate behavior for other persons? How might people of different religious and moral backgrounds work together to bring about good for the greater community—the common good—while maintaining a personal or corporate faith identity? This paper will explore the complicated relationship between Joseph and the Pharaoh of Egypt (Genesis 40-50)—a relationship based on mutual respect as leaders serving a government on the brink of a food crisis. Their

¹ Paul Brandeis Raushenbush, "Election 2012: A New Day for Religion in America," *The Huffington Post*, 11/07/2012. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-raushenbush/a-new-day-for-religion-in-america_b_2088482.html?utm_hp_ref=religion-and-politics

² Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, US Religious Landscape Survey, November 8, 2012, compiled from surveys taken May 8 to Aug. 13, 2007. <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>

partnership provides a potential, albeit imperfect, example of interfaith and secular cooperation in our political climate—a climate that in many ways mirrors that reflected in the biblical text. Such collaborations are taking place around issues of poverty, sexuality, immigration, and other matters; however this paper will focus primarily on coalitions, like Joseph and Pharaoh's interfaith network, that have formed to tackle community food security. While these coalitions can be complicated, the intent and desire to work for the common good makes these difficult liaisons worth the struggle.

The Birth of a Coalition:

Pharaoh had a dream and it disturbed him (41:8).³ He dreamed that while he stood next to the Nile, he watched seven “sleek and fat cows” climb out of the water and graze on reed grass (41:2, 17-18) followed by seven “gaunt and thin” cows who also emerged from the Nile and ate the seven healthy cows (41:3-4, 19-21).⁴ The dream woke Pharaoh yet he returned to sleep and dreamed again. This time he saw seven ears of grain growing on a stalk and they were “plump and good” followed by seven “thin and gaunt” ears of grain that devoured the plump ones. Pharaoh awakes with a troubled spirit (רוחן ותפעם)—he knows that something is amiss propelling

³ Joseph and Daniel are wise dream interpreters and their stories are placed in foreign courts and reflect the realities of exile and how to survive it. Some scholars consider the Joseph novella (Genesis 37-50) as part of the wisdom tradition and date it to the post-exilic period while others consider it to be a composite of the JEPD sources that were compiled over time.

⁴ When Pharaoh recounts the dream to Joseph (41:19-21) he adds a few details: the cows were “very poor and gaunt, and thin,” they were thinner than anything Pharaoh had seen before, and when these cows ate the fat cows they were still gaunt.

him to call for “all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men” (41:8) to render an interpretation of his disturbing dreams. The text gives no information concerning the process by which Egypt’s magicians and wise ones sought to interpret these dreams.⁵ What we know is that they fail. Pharaoh is aware that in these dreams lies an important message from his gods that he needs to hear. He sends for Joseph whose expertise as a dream interpreter is discovered in prison where he accurately predicts the fates of the chief baker and cupbearer (Genesis 40). Joseph makes it quite clear to Pharaoh that it is not his own wisdom that brings meaning to the dream but his God’s (אל־חַיִם, 41:16). After hearing Pharaoh’s dreams, Joseph tells him that both visions forecast the same situation. While presently food is plentiful and will remain that way for seven years, a seven-year famine will follow and consume the land (41:30). Moreover Joseph explains that the doubling of the dream signifies its inevitability: ...”the thing is fixed by God and God will shortly bring it about” (41:32). Pharaoh takes seriously this prophetic message from Joseph’s God. Egypt will soon face a food crisis.

Joseph outlines a plan of action: Pharaoh should take advantage of these years of plenty and create a national food reserve to provide security. Pharaoh is

⁵ Dreams were conduits for the transmission of messages or warnings from the gods. Gottwald Tribl notes that a corpus of nighttime literature (*Duat*) from ancient Egypt attests to their heavy reliance on dreams. [“Dream as a constitutive cultural determinant-The Example of Ancient Egypt.” *International Journal of Dream Research* vol 4, No 1 (April 2011), 24]. Further, it was common for the Pharaohs to write down their dreams for later interpretation. The “Dream Book” from Deir el-Medina from the time of Ramesses II (1279-1213 BCE) gives detailed information on dreams and their meanings. Dream beds, like those found in the Temple in Memphis, provided a restful place for Pharaohs to dream (The British Museum, The Dream Book.”)

pleased with the idea (41:37) and a cooperative relationship between the Egyptian Pharaoh and the Hebrew slave and prisoner begins.

Coalition Building and Interfaith Cooperation:

Coalition⁶ building is often a challenging endeavor. Gathering together people with different religious and cultural identities for a common cause can be difficult, especially when the larger community is engulfed in a crisis like the one described in Genesis 40-50. Couple this with the personal baggage that groups and individuals bring to the table, which greatly influence the overall outcome, and there is the potential for both great success and great failure. These complicated dynamics characterize the relationships between Joseph, the Pharaoh and the peoples of Egypt and Israel. I confess that when I dug deeper into Joseph's story, I began to have second thoughts about the wisdom in turning to this text to discuss interfaith and secular coalitions. Joseph enters Pharaoh's court as a slave and prisoner (41:14) to be raised to Pharaoh's second in command (41:37-45), then to network with Pharaoh to store food for Egypt so they can live through the impending seven years of famine (41:53-57) only to eventually become party to economically enslaving the Egyptian people as Joseph takes their land and livestock in exchange for seed (47:13-26). Even though the people of Egypt eat and Israel prospers in Goshen rather than die in Canaan through Joseph and Pharaoh's actions (47:28), it still raises serious questions about the agendas and outcomes of this or any liaison between people with differing levels of power and influence—questions worth

⁶ I define a coalition as an alliance of people or groups who gather together for combined action.

exploring. Perhaps it is the imperfections in these leaders' characters⁷ and their multifaceted approach to the food crisis that make this narrative a helpful one to examine in the context of our intricate coalitions today—particularly around examples of the food collaborations. Genesis 40-50 serves as an example of how one interfaith coalition pulled together to feed the people.

George Washington, responding to Moses Seixas who worried about how his Jewish community would be treated in the new government of the United States, responds: "The Government of the United States... gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves to be good citizens..."⁸ Washington's pluralist strategy in a diverse democracy, argues Patel, is to respect one another, inter-relate, and work for the common good.⁹ As director and founder of the Interfaith Youthcore (IFYC)—a group committed to building bridges and coalitions among American young people of different faith traditions—Patel discusses the need to value plurality. He defines plurality as the process of actively cementing bonds between people of diverse backgrounds to create better citizens and community wholeness.¹⁰ His framework for pluralism, echoing George Washington's, requires 1. respect for other people's religious beliefs, 2. relationship building among those from different traditions, and

⁷ Many biblical texts portray relationships that are complicated and the "heroes" are human and morally ambiguous. For example, the beloved David kills thousands of people and orchestrates the death of his faithful servant Uriah (2 Samuel 11). Moses murders an Egyptian (Ex. 2:11-14). Sarah sends her Egyptian servant and young child into the desert to die (Genesis 21)

⁸ Eboo Patel quoting George Washington's "To Bigotry no Sanction" in *Sacred Ground. Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America* (Boston: Beacon, 2012), 14.

⁹ Patel, 14-15.

¹⁰ Patel, 70-71

3. “common action for the common good.”¹¹ He has found that the latter, through events like *IFYC*’s “Day of Interfaith Youth Service” where interfaith young people join together for community projects, often provides an environment for people to learn more about each other in the process of community action. George Washington and Eboo Patel’s three-fold framework will serve as the criteria I use to measure the success or failure of Pharaoh and Joseph’s collaboration as they work together to solve Egypt’s food crisis.

Respecting Religious Differences

The text never names the Pharaoh with whom Joseph collaborates but theologically his position as Pharaoh means he wields great religious power. While not equal to the gods, he is closer to the divine than his human counterparts.¹² Each Pharaoh is the offspring of the solar God Re and the Queen, who is impregnated by Re who comes to her disguised as her husband.¹³ Carolyn Higgenbotham notes that in Egyptian cosmology a Pharaoh¹⁴ serves as the intermediary between the human and divine. As the king, Pharaoh embodies the god Horus until his death.¹⁵ He plays a central role in the Egyptian cult as the one responsible for maintaining order in the Temple as well as truth and justice on the earth.¹⁶ His priests are held with respect

¹¹ Patel, 71.

¹² Carolyn Higgenbotham, “Pharaoh,” *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*. Vol 4. (Nashville, Abingdon, 2009),483. Also the gods are “great gods” while the Pharaoh is designated “good/perfect “god.

¹³ Higgenbotham, 484.

¹⁴ Pharaoh and king can be used interchangeably.

¹⁵ Higgenbotham, 483.

¹⁶ Higgenbotham, 484.

and cared for by the crown.¹⁷ This Pharaoh takes his religious responsibilities to heart, which is evident by how important it is for him to find someone to interpret his disturbing dreams and communicate with his gods. Pharaoh comes to the dialogue with Joseph with a deep commitment to and history with the gods of Egypt.

Joseph enters this relationship after losing connection with his family and his land. His brothers sold him into slavery when he was seventeen and he was unjustly imprisoned before reaching Pharaoh's court (Gen 39). Yet Joseph is clearly faithful to the God of his parents, Jacob and Rachel, and God is faithful to him. When sold to Potiphar, Joseph is promoted in Potiphar's household because "the Lord was with him" (39:2). Later, when imprisoned, God gives him favor with his jailers and the ability to interpret the dream of the chief baker and cupbearer (39:21-23). Joseph is emphatic that his ability to interpret dreams is God-given (40:8; 41:25). Joseph's faith in God's providence is made clear when he discloses himself to his brothers and tells them not to be afraid: "for God sent me before you to preserve life" (45:5) and "to preserve you for a remnant on earth and to keep you alive" (45:7). Further, in a sweeping statement of faith in God's providence, Joseph declares to his brothers who fear his retaliation that, "God intended it for good in order to preserve a numerous people" (50:20). Joseph maintains his commitment to the God of Israel throughout his life, and Pharaoh to his. With these strong commitments to their gods and faith traditions, Joseph and Pharaoh join in an interfaith coalition.

Eboo Patel recounts that Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a prominent Christian theologian who once taught in a mission school in India along with faculty who were

¹⁷ "The priests had a fixed allowance from Pharaoh and lived on the allowance that Pharaoh gave them" (47:22).

Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus, resisted the urge to try to convert his colleagues to Christianity. He grew to respect his colleagues of other faith traditions and what they brought to the table that could help him in his own life struggles instead of fearing a loss of his identity.¹⁸ Cantwell Smith concluded that mutual trust and loyalty was necessary to create interfaith relationships. Patel notes that the challenge is “how to have a vertical relationship with one’s own understanding of the divine, and a horizontal relationship with the diversity of the world.”¹⁹ It seems to me that Joseph and Pharaoh are taking this challenge. Pharaoh could have let the dream slip away, after all his own interpreters were baffled. He could have refused to entertain the possibility that someone who worships the God of Israel could offer anything of value to Egypt’s situation. Likewise, Joseph could have refused to accept that Pharaoh’s dream or his gods were legitimate. Instead, both of them learn to respect each other’s belief systems, and trust in the possibilities of collaborating. Joseph recognizes the power of the revealed dream from Pharaoh’s gods and Pharaoh acknowledges the power of Joseph’s interpretation provided from his God (41:37-39). As they exchange ideas they maintain their own religious traditions.

Jim Wallis emphasizes the importance of respecting each other’s differences when in dialogue: “We don’t need to give up our values, water them down, or throw out our convictions to have civil discourse. It is exactly these beliefs that allow us to engage in real dialogue.”²⁰ The text shows no sign of either Pharaoh or Joseph converting to the other’s faith tradition. Indeed, after Pharaoh acknowledges that

¹⁸ Patel, 136.

¹⁹ Patel, 136.

²⁰ Jim Wallis, *On God’s Side: What Religion Forgets and Politics Hasn’t Learned about Serving the Common Good* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2013), 173.

Joseph's God has bestowed on Joseph great wisdom (41:37-38), and after he installs Joseph as second in command (41:40-45), Pharaoh reminds everyone who he is and where his faith allegiance lies as he proclaims: "I am Pharaoh" (41:44). The respect that each has for the other's religion coupled with their mutual belief in the divine power of dreams make it possible for these two to work in tandem on a solution to the food crisis.

The power of faith coalitions to realize dreams and visions cannot be discounted, especially in a nation, like the United States, where religion plays such an important role in the lives of the electorate. When churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, nations, meetings and other faith configurations join together and call on higher powers and values to envision new possibilities, the coalitions often have great clout. For example, in their quest to obtain economic justice, healthy work environments for tomato workers in Florida, and non-toxic tomatoes for the consumer, The *Coalition of Immokalee Workers* (CIW), a group formed from among the farm-workers, contacted the *Interfaith Action of Southwest Florida* (IA). Together they challenge companies who benefit from these poor labor practices. Through this partnership, CIW was able to enlist the help of the Presbyterian Church USA and the National Council of Churches, which together represent 45 million congregants, some of whom provided housing and other support, especially during the "Taco Bell Truth Tour" in 2004.²¹ Tomato aficionado and journalist, Barry Estabrook relates that while students and farm workers demonstrated and held a ten- day hunger strike, church members were among those who worked the

²¹ Barry Estabrook, *Tomatoland. How Modern Industrial Agriculture Destroyed Our Most Alluring Fruit* (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel, 2011), 113.

boardroom.²² As a result, Taco Bell and its conglomerates agreed to the *CIW*'s demands. The interfaith presence coupled with mainstream support helped board members think beyond the bottom line to higher principles that are affirmed through faith and value traditions.²³ Recently sixty members the Florida Conference's United Methodist Women joined *CIW* in their campaign to bring about the same social changes in Florida's Publix Supermarket chain.²⁴ The involvement of these groups bring to the table the presumption that a universal God(s) or a higher being is present and at work settling the issue much like Pharaoh and Joseph's collective belief in the legitimacy of the dream and its interpretation. Coming together as people of different faith and value systems strengthens both coalitions and brings a much-required vision to the problems that need to be solved. Similarly Joseph and Pharaoh's respect for each other's faith traditions help each of them to recognize that they are better, wiser and understanding persons because of their relationships with their God. Respecting each other's faith traditions represents the first pillar to creating a healthy interfaith and secular cooperation.²⁵ Yet members of coalitions must also build personal relationships based on mutual respect, Patel's second pillar for a successful value based relationship.

Building Relationship

²² Estabrook, 113.

²³ The IA: "brings the spiritual resources of diverse faith traditions and the moral weight of faith-based voices in society to our work in collaboration with farm workers for justice in the fields." <http://interfaithact.org/?q=aboutus>

²⁴ *CIW*, "Ripped from the Headlines" July 16, 2013. <http://www.ciw-online.org> accessed July 17, 2013.

²⁵ When Joseph interprets the dream, Pharaoh says to his servants, "Can we find anyone else like this—one in whom there is the spirit of God?" (41:38).

Jonah Pesner and Hurman Hamilton, leaders of the *Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO)*, emphasize the importance of building solid interfaith communities. They shy away from the term “coalition.”²⁶ Coalitions, they suggest, are often utilitarian and wedded to a particular issue.²⁷ There is a danger that when a community problem is solved, the relationship no longer exists, especially when the next issue arises and there is disagreement in how to approach it—not uncommon in communities that hold many diverse theological beliefs. In a community, they argue, “relationships are as important as the shared purpose.”²⁸ There will be tension that tests the cohesiveness of the group but the successful community deals creatively with this tension and strengthens its bonds. These tensions, particularly around faith and cultural values, offer challenges to Joseph and Pharaoh’s alliance.

That Joseph and the Pharaoh not only form a coalition but also build a long-standing relationship is somewhat of a marvel. The relationship between the Hebrew people and Egyptians portrayed in the Hebrew Bible and archaeological record is multifaceted and influenced by uneven power relationships as Egypt colonizes the land of Canaan and its people and, at times, sparks Hebrew resistance to Egyptian hegemony.²⁹ Egypt was a powerful force in the ancient Near East and

²⁶ Jonah Pesner, and H. Hamilton, “A Community, Not Simply a Coalition,” in *My Neighbor’s Faith. Stories of Interreligious Encounter, Growth, and Transformation*. Ed. By Jennifer Howe Peace, O. N. Rose, G. Mobley. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012, 249-251.

²⁷ Pesner and Hamilton, 250.

²⁸ Pesner and Hamilton, 250

²⁹ This is attested in the Amarna tablets dated to ca 1365-1335 BCE. These letters written by vassals of Egypt to the Pharaohs, complain about a group of people, the habiru, perhaps part of the early Hebrews, who wreak havoc in Canaan. See Clyde

the Pharaoh of Genesis 40-50 is its leader. In contrast, the thirty-year old Joseph who arrives in Pharaoh's court has, for most of his life, suffered familial, judicial, and sexual abuse. Furthermore, he is presently a foreigner and an Egyptian slave. Carol Fontaine reminds us that when Joseph enters any public building in Egypt, he is surrounded by images of Egypt's violent treatment of foreigners.³⁰ It was not unusual for Egyptians to buy slaves from Syria and Palestine and they were not always treated well.³¹ There are obvious power dynamics in this relationship between Joseph and Pharaoh. Perhaps their imbalances are more pronounced than those that appear in a typical modern day coalition, but imbalances of authority, means, and ability are common and a realistic part of society. The challenge is to try to move beyond them into a true relationship.

The archaeological record suggests that a group of Semitic people, the Hyksos, lived and ruled Egypt at a time chronologically linked to Joseph's story. Though some scholars believe that Joseph might have been a Hyksos leader, the text does not reflect this. Instead we find a Pharaoh who securely rules Egypt. Pharaoh summons Joseph, hears Joseph's God-given interpretation of the dreams and

Fant and M. Reddish. *Lost Treasures of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 37-42.

³⁰ Carol Fontaine paints a compelling argument for reading the Joseph story as a text about human trafficking and violence. She argues that Joseph moves from victim to victimizer as he enslaves or traffics the Egyptian people. She argues that Joseph's deep wounds from serving as a slave and prisoner make it difficult to envision a more collaborative and egalitarian solution to the problem.³⁰ Carol Fontaine, "Here Comes the Dreamer" Reading Joseph the Slave in Multicultural and Interfaith Contexts," In *Genesis: Texts@Contexts*. Ed. By Athalya Brenner, A. Lee, G. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 131-145. See especially p. 141.

³¹ A Papyrus found in Egypt lists 79 slaves of which 45 were from Syria-Palestine. Alfred Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 149.

recognizes that Egypt's food supply is in danger. When he discovers that Joseph is wise and has a viable plan to divert the catastrophe, Pharaoh raises Joseph to second in command over all of Egypt save Pharaoh's throne (41:25-46). Pharaoh makes a choice. Rather than use this slave and maintain distance, he chooses to build a relationship.

It is not easy building genuine relationship when the power differentials are so enormous. Indeed some would argue that Pharaoh does not at all respect Joseph's cultural identity and, instead, tries to make him Egyptian. Certainly this postcolonial interpretation has merit. However what if we read it differently? There are clues that Pharaoh really likes Joseph and wants him to feel comfortable in his new home. When Joseph aligns with Pharaoh, he is shaved and given new clothes (41:14, 42), which does change his appearance (42:8).³² He learns Egyptian (42:23)³³ and Pharaoh gives him an Egyptian name, "Zaphenath-paneah" (41:45) that signals his new Egyptian role.³⁴ However, the Egyptians appear to use his Hebrew given name when talking to or about him.³⁵ Joseph also enters into an interfaith marriage when Pharaoh offers him Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera, priest of On,³⁶ but his children receive Hebrew names. Calling his children "Manasseh" from the Hebrew meaning "forget" (41:51) and "Ephraim" meaning "fruitful" (41:52), and their

³² His brothers do not recognize him, but they also do not expect to see him in court.

³³ Joseph tells his brothers that he practices divination (44:15) but stating this might be part of his disguise.

³⁴ Terrence Fretheim, "Genesis, the Book of," Vol. 1. *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Ed. L. Keck. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994, 622. Joseph's name translates "God speaks and lives."

³⁵ See 45:16

³⁶ Fretheim, 622. On is otherwise known as Heliopolis, which is the worship center for Re.

biblical interpretations,³⁷ might suggest that Joseph begrudgingly accepts his geographical and emotional separation from his family of origin but does not deny his Hebrew identity. These names might serve to remind him that Canaan is his home. That Joseph is not seated with the Egyptians during a shared meal suggests that Joseph is not fully assimilated into Egyptian culture (43:31-32) since it is taboo for Egyptians and Hebrews to eat together.³⁸ At his death, Joseph asks that his bones be removed from the coffin in Egypt and reburied in the land of his ancestors (50:24-26).

When Pharaoh gives Joseph his signet ring (תְּכִלָּתָה, 41:42), he gives him authority to act on his behalf and, essentially, publicly adopts him into the Egyptian household.³⁹ The people, in turn, are required to respect Joseph's authority, which is clear when they are called to kneel when Joseph passes them in a chariot (41:43). Trusting Joseph with his wealth and authority was a huge act of faith on the part of Pharaoh. Joseph, in turn, trusted Pharaoh's kindness to welcome his family, a group of hungry immigrants from the land of Canaan, into the land of Egypt. Not only did Pharaoh allow them into the country but also he offered them

³⁷ Manasseh is translated “forget” because: “God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father’s house” (41:51) and Ephraim “fruitful” because “for God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes” (41:52).

³⁸ See Carol Dempsey, Carol and E. Shapiro, *Reading the Bible, Transforming Conflict*. Mary Knoll, NY: Orbis, 2011, 45.. “They served him (Joseph) by himself, and them (the brothers) by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because the Egyptians could not eat with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination (תַּזְעַבְתָּה) to the Egyptians” (43:32).

³⁹ The signet ring holds Pharaoh’s signature, Fretheim, 622. Redford connects the gold chain (רְכֵד תְּזַהַב) with “the gold of favor” that is present in Egyptian artwork as a favorite is honored. Donald Redford, *A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 208.

great hospitality by giving them the land of Goshen (47:4-6), prime agricultural land, and wagons to help Joseph's brothers transport their families and possessions from Canaan (45:16-24). Pharaoh's respect for Joseph was further evident when he welcomed Joseph's father Jacob into his court (47:7) and received Jacob's blessing rather than making him bow down (47:8-10). While we are not privy to the entire length of Pharaoh and Joseph's continued relationship, we do know that Joseph remains in Egypt's court until his death, in spite of his desire to return to his homeland (50:22-26). Joseph and Pharaoh's coalition, based on trust and respect, outlive the food crisis that brought them together. They, presumably, maintain a life-long friendship. That Pharaoh is Pharaoh and Joseph his second in command certainly creates power struggles between them, but still these two work together bringing their unique skills and perspectives and putting aside their religious and cultural differences.

The last of Patel's three pillars for healthy interfaith communities is that members unite together to act on behalf of the common good.⁴⁰ Joseph and Pharaoh unite, feed the people, but did they work for the common good? The answer to this question is complicated.

Working for the Common Good

Philosophers over the years have defined and redefined the concept of the common good. A definition that I find helpful is from Santa Clara University's Markkula center:

⁴⁰ Patel, 70-71.

The common good, then, consists primarily of having the social systems, institutions, and environments on which we all depend and work in a manner that benefits all people. Examples of particular common goods or parts of the common good include an accessible and affordable public health care system, and effective system of public safety and security, peace among the nations of the world, a just legal and political system, and unpolluted natural environment, and a flourishing economic system.⁴¹

Bringing his Christological perspective, Jim Wallis writes: "For Christians, the idea of the common good derives from Jesus' commandment to love our neighbor—including "the least of these..."⁴² Working toward the common good is about creating a better society and requires the cooperation and hard work of many people, recognizing that there are disagreements concerning what benefits society.

Pharaoh's dream makes clear that the bounty that Egypt enjoys will be short-lived. After seven plenteous years, there will be a seven-year famine. The surety and severity of the famine are highlighted in the text. The doubling of the dreams (41:32), and the repetition of the word "famine" (בָּשָׂר) that appears 22 times in Joseph's story, emphasize the national crisis that will impact Egypt: "the famine will consume the land" (41:31).⁴³ This is going to be a catastrophic event and they need to prepare for it.

⁴¹ Manuel Velasquez, C. Andre, T. Shanks, S.J., and M. J. Meyer, "The Common Good." Markkula Center for Advanced Ethics, Santa Clara University.

<http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/decision/commongood.html>

⁴² Wallis, Preface. Wallis notes that this sentiment is part of many faith traditions.

⁴³ The verb בָּשַׂר translated as "severe" appears several times with the subject בָּשָׂר or "famine" (See Gen 41:56, 57; Gen 47:20). The adjective כָּבֵד "heavy" is attributed to בָּשָׂר and has also been translated as "severe" (Gen 43:1; 47:4, 13).

That Pharaoh and Joseph trust the signs and choose to act testifies to their belief in the power of the divine to enter into dreams and their collective caring for the welfare of the people of Egypt. Joseph is appointed to oversee a huge operation that includes placing overseers over all of Egypt to collect one fifth of the land's produce during the fertile years (41:34). This grain will then be stored in granaries, under Pharaoh's authority, scattered throughout the Egyptian cities where they will, presumably, distribute it more efficiently (41:35).⁴⁴ The goal for the collected food: to "be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine that are to befall the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish through the famine" (41:36). Pharaoh intentionally puts into place a plan to care for the future needs of his subjects. He wants them to live—to eat.

During this plethora of food, twenty percent of every Egyptian's produce (41:34) yields immeasurable abundance—"like the sand of the sea" (41:49). In these times of plenty, it must have been difficult to convince the Egyptians that a food shortage was on the way and that they needed to part with a portion of their harvest. Likewise, it is difficult to convince many of today's consumers that we are entering into a time of food insecurity when our grocery store shelves are brimming with foodstuff. Farmers and environmentalists like Michael Pollan, Vandana Shiva, and Bill McKibben continue to sound the alarm that our food security is at risk because of the diminishing of biodiversity, the extreme changes in the climate that impact the yield of crops, and the consolidation of food sources under a few large

⁴⁴ "Let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming, and lay up grain under the authority of Pharaoh for food in the cities, and let them keep it" (41:35).

corporations.⁴⁵ Joseph and Pharaoh form a coalition to act on behalf of the common good by devising a government food reserve system such that all can eat when resources become scarce.

Wallis, discussing a biblical understanding of the responsibility of governments concludes: "Government is supposed to be our servant for good. Today we might say 'the common good' is to be the focus and goal of government."⁴⁶ Yet governments are rarely perfect and often politicians get rich in the process of being public servants. Case in point, many United States presidents and senators are millionaires and function in an electoral system influenced by wealthy individuals and companies.⁴⁷ Are Pharaoh and Joseph working for the common good? Or Could Walter Brueggemann be correct that Joseph, while a great administrator, is in danger of succumbing to the empire's greed because the food reserves bring with them great wealth?⁴⁸ This is certainly a common interpretation of the text and one that has merit.⁴⁹

It is important to note that both Pharaoh and Joseph represent the Egyptian

⁴⁵ McKibben, *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet* (NY: Macmillan, 2010); Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma. A Natural History of Four Meals* (NY: Penguin, 2009); Shiva, *Earth Democracy. Justice, Sustainability, and Peace.* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2005).

⁴⁶ Wallis, 220.

⁴⁷ Wallis, 67-68.

⁴⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis. Interpretation. A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1982), 356.

⁴⁹ See West, Gerald and Thulani Ndiazi. "Leadership ad Land.' A Very Contextual Interpretation of Genesis 37-50 in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa." In *Genesis: Texts@Contexts*. Ed. By Athalya Brenner, A. Lee, G. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 175-190 who examine this text in the context of land confiscation in apartheid South Africa; and Fontaine, 'Here Comes the Dreamer' Reading Joseph the Slave in Multicultural and Interfaith Contexts" who argues that Joseph is a slave trafficker.

empire and draw on these political processes and governmental mechanisms to meet their goals. Egypt during this period, and even the Canaanite city-states from where Joseph's family arrives, was highly stratified, militarized, and their inhabitants substantially taxed.⁵⁰ The land belonged to the Pharaoh and those at the bottom of the social stratum—slaves, small farmers, serfs—often surrendered the fruits of their hard work to those in leadership,⁵¹ dynamics that are reflected in this narrative.

Joseph travels through Egypt, collects the grain and stores it in the royal granaries (41:46-49). When the famine makes it necessary to dig into the reserves, the people cry out to Pharaoh who sends them to Joseph who then opens the granaries and sells food to the Egyptians and to “the whole world” (**כל הארץ**) because Egypt is well-stocked (41:53-57): “There was famine in every country, but throughout Egypt there was bread” (41:54). Apparently, leaders of neighboring countries did not make provisions for a famine: Egypt and the rest of the world are fed because of Pharaoh, Joseph, and the Egyptian people’s cooperation and foresight to ensure food security—acting for the common good.⁵² But in the process, Egypt’s food sources becomes centralized and controlled by Pharaoh.

Ellen Davis, regarding the social situation in Egypt during the Exodus, quotes historian Brian Donohue: “We agrarians can’t be taken seriously unless we begin

⁵⁰ Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture. An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 68.

⁵¹ Davis, 68-69.

⁵² Birch, et al, are among those who read God’s providence and blessing for both Egypt and Israel in Joseph’s actions (p. 85). A tomb relief in Saqqara depicts emaciated people—the result of a famine? In addition, ca. 19th century tomb paintings at Beni Hasan chronicle Semites migrating into the land of Egypt.

with the premise that life has been brutally hard for most farm people...for most of human history farmers have been ensnared in political and economic systems designed to extract what they produce, and leave them barely enough to survive.”⁵³ These concerns apply to the Egypt’s farmers. The fruits of their labor are taken away. We do not know how the citizens of Egypt felt about the state’s food policy. When the famine arrives and they are famished, they appear not to resist paying for the food that they had relinquished during the years of abundance to fill Pharaoh’s coffers (41:56). Later, when things are even more difficult, and the people have to rely on the granaries because they are unlikely to be able to grow food in the parched earth, they exhaust their money supplies (47:14), hand over their livestock (47:15-17), and their land and labor to Pharaoh (18-21). The people have one request of Joseph: “Just give us seed, so that we may live and not die, and that the land not become desolate” (47:19).

Pharaoh and Joseph accept the people’s land and labor in exchange for food and seed. The Egyptians are required to continually send twenty percent of their yield to Pharaoh, but are allowed to keep eighty percent: “as food for yourselves and your households, and as food for your little ones” (47:23-26). The people respond: “You have saved our lives: may it please my Lord, we will be **עַבְדִּים** to Pharaoh” (47:25).⁵⁴ Many biblical translations differ in how they read **עַבְדִּים**. The NIV

⁵³ Davis, 67. Her quote comes from Brian Donahue, “The Resettling of America,” in *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community and the Land*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 38.

⁵⁴ Victor Hurowitz, “Joseph’s Enslavement of the Egyptians (Gen 47:13-26) in Light of Famine Texts from Mesopotamia,” *Revue Biblique* 101-103 (1994), 355-362. Hurowitz argues that people’s words serve to legally bind them to Pharaoh, similar

translates it “servitude, the JPS “servants,” and the NRSV “slaves.” Fretheim and others suggest that the people become tenant farmers who are now called to work the land on behalf of Pharaoh.⁵⁵ Leaving the people on their former property to farm, then surrendering a portion of the produce to the state, as rendered in the Septuagint, strengthens this possibility.⁵⁶ Whether we translate **עָבָדִים** as servant or slave, the reality remains the same: Pharaoh and Joseph’s food system makes the people landless and beholden to the state for their food.

Why were the people so quick to offer themselves to the government (47:19)?⁵⁷ Certainly they were hungry and the alternative was death. By taking the people’s land, making them tenant farmers of the state, were Joseph and Pharaoh acting for the common good? It is possible that they thought that they were? After all, Egypt now has a food system that ensures that everybody eats. Clearly the surrounding nations have not made provisions for their people, hence the necessity to journey to Egypt to buy food (41:53-57). Later Israelite kings are just as inadequately prepared. Facing a famine and national hunger, Ahab feeds his mules, horses and few privileged prophets of Baal and Asherah, but his people starve (1

to what is found in Mesopotamian texts.

⁵⁵ Fretheim, 654. See also 41:23.

⁵⁶There is a textual problem with v. 21. The MT translates the verse as: "And as for the people, he [Joseph] moved them to cities from one end of the borders of Egypt to the other end of it" (47:21, JPS translation). The Septuagint, on the other hand, reads: Some English translations unlike the King James Version and NAS, choose to incorporate the Septuagint’s translation: "And he brought the people into bondage to him, for servants, from one extremity of Egypt to the other." The Septuagint’s rendering of v. 21 makes more sense to a kingdom hoping to live off the people’s produce.

⁵⁷ The text states that the people declare to Joseph: "You have saved our lives, May it please my Lord, we will be slaves to Pharaoh?" (47:25).

Kings 18).⁵⁸ Likewise, in Jehoram's Israel his famished subjects are willing to pay premium prices for dove dung and donkey's heads or resort to cannibalism (2 Kings 6:24-7:20).⁵⁹ And in a nation where Pharaohs have absolute power, creating a government program that aims to provide food, even in times of emergency, appears to be a good first step.

Perhaps we would feel more comfortable had Pharaoh and Joseph given away or sold the food at a reasonable price to the Egyptian people, or perhaps had not allowed other nations to participate in the market or making them pay a much higher price. Perhaps Pharaoh, whose position grants him what he desires, believes that allowing people to keep eighty percent of their crop yield is quite generous even if they forfeit their land. Eighty percent might have provided more than enough food and reserves for the people during times of plenty. What were other options for solving this crisis in this historical context? Even more important, would the people have been better off had Joseph and Pharaoh not acted? Or would they have starved? In Pharaoh and Joseph's Israel, the people eat, but the way this coalition works toward a solution is unpalatable to our sense of justice.

It is much easier to dismiss this text as merely an example of power at its worst. In an ideal ancient world Egypt's coalition would have included farmers and community leaders able to advocate for the re-selling of the grain in more favorable terms for the poor. However this type of coalition was rarely an option in ancient governments. It is unfair to vilify Pharaoh and Joseph and not recognize the many

⁵⁸ Saul is commissioned to feed his people, 2 Sam 5:2; 1 Chron 11:2.

⁵⁹ "As the siege continued, famine in Samaria became so great that a donkey's head was sold for eighty shekels of silver, and one-fourth of a kab of dove's dung for five shekels of silver." (NRSV). Two mothers make a deal to eat each other's child.

ways that ancient Egypt's commoditization of the food market parallels today's global food systems that function to make some rich and others poor. As food costs rise, fuel that feeds the agribusinesses becomes more volatile, sources of fertilizers dry up, and the monopolizing of our food sources become realized—our food is in danger.⁶⁰ Wealthy conglomerates, controlled by a handful of corporations, have little incentive to modify the hierarchy to make room for smaller farms and businesses. Farmers are losing land and lawsuits, the ability to save their seeds and maintain their autonomy. Slavery, in the process of food production, is as much a part of present day United States as it was in Joseph and Pharaoh's Egypt. States Attorney Douglas Molloy calls South Florida's tomato fields "ground zero for modern day slavery."⁶¹ Many of these slaves are Hispanic migrants who have little protection from the law. For many the situation is brutal:

Workers were "sold" to crew bosses to pay off bogus debts, beaten if they didn't feel like working or were too sick or too weak to work, held in chains, pistol whipped, locked at night into shacks in chain-link enclosures patrolled by armed guards. Escapees who got caught were beaten or worse.⁶²

Many workers have been killed and company leaders rarely are prosecuted. A slave likely picks some of the tomatoes that we eat in the United States during the

⁶⁰ For example, Monsanto, Cargill, Archer Daniel Midlands (ADM) and Bunge have majority control over the global grain trading. For a great discussion of the food crisis see Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace, "Hunger and the Pursuit of Profit. Food System in Crisis," June 2008, <http://www.devp.org/devpme/eng/advocacy/doc/DPFood.pdf>

⁶¹ Estabrook, xix.

⁶² Estabrook, xix, see also 73-95.

winter.⁶³ In Joseph and Pharaoh's time, networking was much more difficult than today's highly connected world. The news media often brings things to light, and social media provides tools for coalitions to unite against such injustices and tackle many of these problems. For example, the *Coalition of Immokalee Workers* in community with the *Interfaith Action of Southwest Florida* continue to call attention to modern-day trafficking that permeates Florida's tomato production through these networking outlets. Their collaborative action continues to promote justice for workers and their strategy models how coalitions, when they respect each other's faith traditions, create strong relational bonds, and act for the common good.

It is important to remember that members of coalitions may have altruistic intentions for serving the common good, but come to the table with agendas, histories and power issues. Joseph and Pharaoh's confiscation of the land and servitude of the people reflect the social and political system in which they work. Their intention was good—to feed the people—but the accompanying consequences of their policies were despotic. Negotiating these power disparities is a necessary part of coalition building. The good news is that this activity is occurring and that coalitions are forming between financial giants and those with much less power.

Very few corporations are as controversial as Monsanto. It controls nearly 80% of US corn and 90% of soybeans. In short, the company has been called “the Lord of Life”⁶⁴ because it holds the majority of patents on seeds that the world

⁶³ Estabrook xx, Malloy says that these tomatoes are definitely picked by a slave. Estabrook notes that slavery and paying low wages to farm workers is attractive because wages are the only controllable variable in tomato production, p. xviii.

⁶⁴ Vandana Shiva, “Monsanto and the Seeds of Suicide. *Common Dreams*, March 27, 2013, Suicidehttps://www.commondreams.org/view/2013/03/27-4

depends on to survive. Protests, movies, books, lectures vilifying this company abound. They are wealthy and have friends in all branches of the US government and throughout the world. To many food activists Monsanto is evil incarnate. Imagine my surprise when progressive journalist Tom Philpott, often critical of Monsanto, writes an article in praise of this giant's willingness to participate in "The Eastern Broccoli Project," a coalition that partners with smaller seed companies, a few universities, and the Department of Agriculture to create a strain of broccoli that is not a GMO, is nutritionally sound, and is open sourced and for common consumption.⁶⁵ Does one dismiss this opportunity to support greater food security because Monsanto is involved? Likewise, the *Coalition of Immokalee Workers*, advocating for Florida tomato workers, often find themselves sitting at the table with the powerful tomato growers, who are responsible for their suffering, and with food distributors to negotiate just policy.⁶⁶ Steven Kirk, President of Rural Neighborhoods, a coalition that builds quality affordable housing for Florida tomato farmers, recognizes the benefit of navigating uneven power dynamics in coalitions. He notes the unwritten understanding from all sides when they capitalize on these power differentials: "We let them co-opt us and we co-opt them."⁶⁷

Food advocates are searching for alternatives to large-scale monopolies and corporation-controlled food (and, yes, alternatives to large-scale food cartels like that created by Joseph and Pharaoh). While not impossible, it is more difficult to

⁶⁵ Philpott, Tom. "Monsanto, Broccoli. I Love the Really!" Mother Jones Magazine, July 13, 2013. <http://www.motherjones.com/tom-philpott/2013/07/eastern-broccoli-monsanto-involved-plant-breeding-project-i>

⁶⁶ Many tomato farm workers are undocumented with few safety nets, and some tomato growers hold them economically hostage. See Eastabrook.

⁶⁷ Eastabrook, 164.

exploit and easier to focus on the common good on a local level. Communities concerned about food security and local economies are turning to cooperative, sustainable models of food production and distribution to stabilize their local communities. For example Ben Hewitt, examines how Hardwick, VT, a small town whose source of income—granite production—dried up and left many in the town under and unemployed, pulled their resources, worked together as a community, grew their own food and, as a result, increased their “economic vitality, food security, and general resilience in uncertain times.”⁶⁸ Hewitt credits the success of Hardwick’s resurrection on mutual trust, successful collaboration among the local businesses and the reality of poverty in the community. The small-scale nature of these collaborations with their built-in intimacy often serves to keep these desires in check.⁶⁹

Interfaith and secular coalitions, that focus on respect for different faith traditions, create community, and act on behalf of the common good, have great potential to build stronger communities and more compassionate global citizens. The values of love, justice, and peace that these traditions bring to the table cannot be understated. In addition, the collective power they can wield against politically unjust systems has led, in many cases, to liberating policy changes. Joseph and Pharaoh’s interfaith coalition succeeds when they intentionally work with each other’s faith traditions and recognize the divine power of Pharaoh’s dreams and the

⁶⁸ Ben Hewitt, *The Town that Food Saved. How One Community Found Vitality in Local Food* (NY: Rodale, 2010), 2.

⁶⁹ Hardwick is not an interfaith organization, however, the over 10 faith communities serving 3200 citizens suggests that people of faith participate in this secular endeavor.

urgency to find a solution to the impending food crisis. Furthermore, it works when they show mutual respect and trust in the gifts that they bring to the table that help them devise a system to feed all of Egypt during the famine. They should be affirmed for stepping out of the social and biblical norms by embracing each other and trying to find a solution to a very difficult challenge in Egypt. As a result, the people eat. However, their alliance is unsuccessful when the two of them collude to take advantage of the food crisis. They further stratify the power structures in Egypt by placing their people in economic bondage. The food security gained with Pharaoh and Joseph's food reserves, to which the people contribute, swiftly changes to food insecurity when the people are forced to rely on the goodness of the government to obtain seed. These same power dynamics exist today as the food industrial complex controls the global food market. Examining Joseph and Pharaoh's coalition helps remind us of what works well and the dangers that can result when a coalition loses sight of the common good. Reading the dynamics in these coalitions or even the fruits of Joseph and Pharaoh's partnership as either fully good or fully evil discounts the richness of the narrative and the many ways that it gets to the heart of human and institutional collaborations. The key is to enter into these coalitions aware of whom we are working with and what we hope to accomplish.

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