

Heroes, Villains, and Flawed Human Beings

Genesis 37.1-4; 37.12-28, Romans 10.4-15, Matthew 14.22-36

Today, as in much of the Bible and much of modern social media, we will use a little hyperbole to explore notions of good and bad, hero and villain, saint and sinner, and what it means to be either, neither or a little of both.

Who is your favourite fictional hero? What makes them heroic? [...]

A favourite villain? What makes them villainous? [...]

A favourite character who is neither, or perhaps a mix of both? Why? [...]

One of my favourite people in the Bible is Joseph, not because he is a hero or a villain but because for me he is neither or both, I can never quite decide. Perhaps he is, like all of us, a human being, as Psalm 139.14 says, “fearfully and wonderfully made”.

Joseph’s story is a very long one. We meet him today in our Genesis reading as a seventeen-year-old, and a favourite child, resented by his brothers. There were 12 brothers in this family. Six were the sons of Leah, two (Joseph and Benjamin) were the favoured sons of Jacob’s favourite wife Rachel, 2 were the sons of Leah’s handmaid Zilpah, and 2 were the sons of Rachel’s handmaid, Bilhah. No doubt these complicated family relationships and patterns of favour played a part in the brothers’ relationships as well.

I can understand Joseph’s 10 older brothers’ resentment of their younger, and perhaps rather indulged, brother. Joseph was favoured by their father and seems to have told tales on them and about them. Some of his tales were about his dreams, which clearly showed Joseph in a light superior to that of his brothers. The fact that those dreams came true did not make them any less resented at the time.

Nevertheless, the brothers’ resentment was not a solid wall. There were times when it softened, and the voices of mercy were heard. Reuben and Judah (2 of the sons of Leah) both spoke up for Joseph, not necessarily because of Joseph’s better qualities, but because he was, after all, their brother, their own flesh and blood, a child of the same father. Because of their intervention, Joseph did not die but was sold into slavery. Good decision? Bad decision?

There is a parallel between the stories of this young Joseph and the later story of Joseph in Egypt. The boy Joseph had dreams that were interpreted by his family, and the man Joseph interpreted the dreams of others and foresaw the future.

Young Joseph escaped death but became enslaved. Later, when he was in a position of power in Egypt, he enabled the whole population of that land to escape death, surviving long years of killing drought. However, they, in turn, were eventually enslaved to Pharaoh, when they sold all their possessions to buy food and, when there was no more to be sold, they sold their land and sold themselves into slavery. Under Joseph’s supervision, all eventually belonged to Pharaoh.

Like the young Joseph, all in Egypt and Canaan escaped death but were enslaved. What had been done to Joseph, he did by different means to a whole population. Nevertheless, they survived.

Let's revisit the stereotypes of heroes and villains, whether fictional or actual humans.



Can you tell me who Christopher Reeve is? [...] [Superman, and the actor who, at the age of 43, was paralysed from the neck down and left unable to breathe without a ventilator after being thrown from his horse during an equestrian competition in Culpeper, Virginia. He was admired as a fictional hero and a human hero.]

Christopher Reeve said: *"A hero is an ordinary individual who finds the strength to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles."*



And who is Mary Shelley? [...] [English novelist, best known for writing *Frankenstein* and for her relationship with the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. This time, we have a fictional character and a human being both vilified for their conduct.] A question for those who have actually read the book: Was Frankenstein's monster really a villain or something else? [...]

A quote often attributed to Mary Shelley is, "The story of villains is much more entertaining than the story of heroes, because monsters are not born; they are made. They do not emerge from the void or darkness by themselves, but they are shaped by circumstances, by the wounds of the world around them."

Here is an AI description of Joseph.

- **Unwavering Integrity:** Resisted severe temptation in Potiphar's house, choosing prison over compromising his morals.
- **Radical Forgiveness:** Chose grace and reconciliation over revenge when dealing with the brothers who betrayed him into slavery.
- **Resilience:** Maintained a positive, diligent, and faithful attitude through a "pit-to-palace" journey that included false imprisonment
- **Administrative Wisdom:** Guided Egypt—and his own family—through a devastating seven-year famine through careful foresight and excellent stewardship.

Do you think it is fair comment? Accurate? Inaccurate? Complete? Incomplete?

So/and, what do you think of Joseph? Hero, villain or more complex human being? [...]



We should resist the temptation to typecast others or ourselves as either heroes or villains. God knows our hearts in all their complexity, and God also knows the reasons for that complexity. Historian Eladio Bobadilla wrote: "A proper work of history, one that captures the past in all its complexity, must strive to understand why our subjects acted and reacted, thought and believed, as they did. If we

are to truly understand the past and change the future, a simplistic, moralistic account will not do.”

Let’s move to our Gospel reading and consider the complexity of Peter, and particularly his relationship with Jesus. We have heard different aspects of his story in many scripture accounts, with his more heroic moments and his less heroic moments.

Peter was the disciple who was devoted unto death, and he was also one who doubted, denied and disowned Jesus.

Can you name an instance of Peter at his worst? [...]

And Peter at his best? [...]

Which was easier to bring to mind?

Same man at different moments. There were times when he failed Jesus utterly, and yet Jesus spoke of him as a rock, a foundation, the one he could rely on for one of the most important tasks there could be. Jesus does not always choose the strongest, smartest, bravest people. He chooses the ones he believes are the best for what needs to be done, even if they do not easily believe that about themselves. The important thing is that they believe, trust, and hope in Jesus. They rely on Jesus utterly and live their lives in that context. In the Gospel accounts we see Peter move from knowing Jesus as a charismatic teacher to knowing him as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. We also see Peter grow from a simple fisherman to a leader of Jesus’ disciples.

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus sent his disciples across the lake to Gennesaret, where Jesus would heal many who were sick. The lake that they crossed (known as the Sea of Galilee and a range of other names) is relatively shallow and lies in a deep rift valley. It is renowned for both its serene waters and sudden windstorms.



When the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water, they were understandably terrified of an unknown phenomenon. Jesus’ reassurance is exactly what they need to know – not “I am not a ghost” or “It’s OK. You are safe.” but “Take heart! It is I. Do not be afraid.”

“It is I!” is the central point, book-ended by the call to courage instead of fear. For the disciples, and for Matthew’s listeners or readers, that statement, “It is I.” carries echoes of the great ***I am***. That is all they needed. Peter, of course, pushes the boundaries and asks to test Jesus. The one who fails the test is Peter himself, but still Jesus saves him. Jesus then stays with the disciples for the remainder of the crossing.

Jesus also stays with us when we are saints and sinners, doubting and believing. He is with us for the long haul, in fair weather and foul. This is not because of who we are but because of who he is. Paul says in his letter to the Romans, As Scripture says, ‘No-one who believes in him will be put to shame.’ For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of **all** and richly blesses **all** who call on him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’ We are called to follow and to call and encourage others.

... As it is written: 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!' (Romans 10:11-13, 15)

Let us finish by revisiting the prayer of the day.

Prayer of the Day

Mighty God and ruler of all creation,
give new strength to our faith,
that we may recognise your presence
even when all hope seems lost.
Help us to face all trials with serenity
as we walk with Christ through the stormy seas of life
and come at the last to your eternal peace. [10 am **Amen**]
[We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.] This part for St Michael's only. **Amen.**

APPENDIX

Jacob's sons and their mothers are:

Leah: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun

Rachel: Joseph, Benjamin

Zilpah (Leah's handmaid): Gad, Asher

Bilhah (Rachel's handmaid): Dan, Naphtali