EVERYMAN.
I WILL GO WITH THEE,
AND BE THY GUIDE,
IN THY MOST NEED
TO GO BY THY SIDE

THOMAS MANN
JOSEPH
AND HIS
BROTHERS

THE STORIES OF JACOB
YOUNG JOSEPH
JOSEPH IN EGYPT
JOSEPH THE PROVIDER

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY
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The Rascal Servant

It is time to make room for a trustworthy clarification of Joseph's actions as an administrator, so that for good and all this may put an end to poorly informed rumors that have circulated over these many years, frequently degenerating into slurs and slander. The primary blame for such misunderstandings, often ending in the condemnation of Joseph's conduct in office as downright "atrocious," rests—and there is no getting round the charge—on the earliest recorded version, which is so laconic that it cannot come close to the story as it originally told itself, that is, to reality as it once happened.

This earliest record of the actions taken by Pharaoh's great commercial agent is based on the kind of hard and dry facts that neither provide any sense of the universal admiration they originally aroused, nor explain that admiration, which frequently merged on Joseph's being idolized and led to his titles, such as "Provider" and "Lord of Bread," being taken so literally that great masses of people dreamily regarded him as a kind of Nile divinity, indeed, as the incarnation of Hapi himself, the preserver and spender of all life.

The mythical popularity that Joseph acquired and that it had probably always been his nature to acquire was based above all on the shimmering mixed character and ambiguity—mirrored by the laughter in his eyes—of his measures, which functioned, as it were, in two directions at once, combining in a thoroughly personal way his various purposes and goals with a kind of magical wit. We speak of wit because this principle has its place in the little cosmos of our story and early on the statement was made that wit is by nature a messenger who goes back and forth, a nimble ambassador between two opposing spheres and influences—for example, between the forces of the sun and moon, the father's legacy and the mother's legacy, between the blessing of the day and the blessing of the night—indeed, to put it in direct and all-inclusive terms, between life and death. Such mediation, so slender and agile as it merrily goes about reconciliation, had never found real expression in any divinity in the land where Joseph was a guest, in the Land of Black Earth. Thoth, the scribe and guide for the dead, the inventor of so many clever things, came closest to such a figure. Only Pharaoh, before whom all divine matters were brought from far and wide, had knowledge of a more perfected version of this divine character, and the grace that Joseph had found before him was due primarily to the fact that Pharaoh recognized in him the traits of that rascal child of the cave, that lord of tricks, and had quite rightly told himself that a king could wish for nothing better than to have as his minister such a manifestation and incarnation of this profitable divine idea.

The children of Egypt became acquainted with this winged figure through Joseph, and if they did not include him in their pantheon it was only because that place was already taken by Djehuti, the white monkey. All the same, the experience meant an enhancement of their religion, especially because of the delightful change it brought to the concept of magic—and this alone was sufficient to evoke the mythical amazement of these children. For them magic had always had something worrisome and frighteningly serious about it; for them the point of all magic was to build the most solid, impenetrable barrier possible against evil, which is why Joseph's grand hoarding of grain and his countless cone-shaped storehouses had appeared to them in a magical light. But what seemed truly magical to them was the encounter between foresight and evil here—which is to say, the way in which the Spender of Shade led evil around by the nose, used his measures to both his advantage and profit, making them serve purposes about which this stupid dragon, bent only on destruction, could never have had the remotest notion. This was unexpectedly good-humored magic that simply made them laugh.

And among the people there was indeed a great deal of laughter—admiring laughter—at how Joseph, by coolly exploiting every rise in price when dealing with the great and rich, provided for his lord, for Horus in his palace, making Pharaoh a man of gold and silver by directing into his treasury the vast flow of sums he demanded the great landowners pay for grain. In all of this he proved a debt and loyal servant of a divinity who is the epitome of service dedicated to passing on profits. Hand in hand with this, however, went the free distribution of grain among the starving commonfolk of the cities in the name of their young Pharaoh dreaming of his god—who now profited as much if not more from this as he did from being showered with gold. This union of crown politics with concern for the
people's welfare was very innovative, its effect exhilarating, and to have any idea of its true appeal when reading the first account of this story, one must be very well versed in its style and able to read between the lines. That report's relationship to its own original version, that is, to the story that told itself as it happened, is hinted at by certain rough and yet utterly comical turns of phrase that sound like remnants of some popular farce through which the character of the original event still glimmers. When, for instance, the starving come to Joseph crying: "Give us bread! Why should we die before your eyes? Our money is gone"—a very rudimentary manner of speech found nowhere else in the Pentateuch—Joseph answers in the same style, that is, in these words: "Here! Give me your cattle! I will give you food in exchange." Pharaoh's great marketeer and the needy did not, it goes without saying, deal with one in that tone of voice. But these turns of phrase sound very much like a recollection of the people's mood as they experienced these events—a comedic mood devoid of all moralistic, whining self-pity.

The venerable narrator was nevertheless unable to prevent reproaches of Joseph's conduct as exploitative and harsh, and instead has elicited cries of condemnation from those inclined to take moral matters very seriously. That is understandable. We learn from them that in the course of those years of desperation Joseph first gathered up all the money to be found in the land, which is to say, brought it into Pharaoh's treasury, that he then took people's cattle in security and finally expropriated their fields, drove them from house and farm, resettling them wherever he pleased on strange soil, to have them drudge there as slaves of the state. That is not pleasant to hear, but the reality looked very different, as is clear from certain other turns of phrase the report once again culled from old memories. One reads: "He gave them bread for their horses, flocks, herds, and asses, and he fed them with bread in exchange for all their cattle that year." Except the translation is inexact and leaves out a certain allusion that the original whispers very intentionally. We find there, instead of "fed," a word that means "to lead"; "and he led them," it says, "with bread in exchange for all their possessions that year"—a peculiar expression and very carefully chosen, for it is taken from the language of shepherds and means "to tend," "to pasture," means conscientious and gentle care for helpless creatures, and in particular of an easily confused herd of sheep. And to the mythically trained ear this salient and formulaic word ascribes to Jacob's son the role and character of a good shepherd who tends his people, who grazes them in green pastures and leads them to fresh water. Here, as in those previous farcical turns of phrase, the colors of the original event show through; the strange verb "to lead," which has, so to speak, crept out of reality and into this text's account, betrays in what light the people regarded Pharaoh's great favorite—they saw him quite differently from the way modern political moralists feel compelled to judge him. For tending, pasturing, and leading is the work of a god familiar as the "lord of the subterranean sheepfold."

The factual statements of the text stand firm and unshakable. Joseph sold grain to those who had wealth, that is, to barons of the nomes and great landowners who thought themselves equal to kings, at whatever brazen price the market allowed and brought "money," that is, bartered goods, into the royal coffers, so that very soon there was no longer any "money" in the narrower sense left among the people, that is, in the form of precious metals—for there was no such thing as money in the form of minted coins, and assets offered in exchange for grain were necessarily all sorts of cattle. This did not happen in sequence as need escalated, and any depiction that leaves the impression that Joseph exploited people by first stripping them of their money in order then to take their horses, cattle, and sheep is anything but accurate. Cattle is also money; it is even money in a very particular sense, as can be seen in our modern word "pecuniary"; and even before the well-to-do paid in the form of ornamental vases of gold and silver, they paid with cattle and sheep—which is not to say that every last cow ended up in Pharaoh's stalls and pens. Joseph did not build stalls and pens for seven years, but cone-shaped storehouses, and he had neither room nor use for all this cattle-money. Those who have never heard of the economic practices of the money changers of Lombardy cannot, to be sure, follow a story such as this. Cattle were lent or pawned—one may choose whichever term one prefers. For the most part they remained on the same farms and estates, but had ceased to be owned, in the original sense of the word, by their owners. That is, these things were their property and yet were it no longer, were it only conditionally, as encumbered goods. And if the first account is in any way inadequate, it is because it fails to awaken an impression on which so much else depends: that Joseph's conduct was aimed entirely at casting a magic
spell over the idea of property, at leaving it hovering between ownership and nonownership, in a state of conditional or feudal tenure.

For as years of drought and a wretchedly low flood level followed one after the other, as the queen of the harvest continued to turn her breast away, as grass did not sprout and grain did not grow, as the womb remained closed and allowed no child of earth to flourish—what ensued then was indeed very much in accordance with our text, for great portions of the Black Earth previously in private hands became property of the crown, or as the text puts it: "So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh, for all the Egyptians sold their fields." For what? For seed corn. The scholars are in agreement that this must have been toward the end of the cycle of hunger, when the chains of infertility had begun to loosen somewhat, when watery things had returned to something like normal, and the fields could have yielded a harvest if they had been sown. Which explains the words of the suppliants: "Why should we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Buy us and our land for food, and we with our land will be serfs to Pharaoh; and give us seed, that we may live and not die, and that the land may not be desolate." Who is speaking here? These are spoken words, not an outcry from the people. It is a proposal, an offer, made by individuals, by a group belonging to a previously intractable if not rebellious class of men, the owners of great latifundia and princes of the nomes, to whom early in the dynasty Pharaoh Akhmose had been forced to cede vast independent tracts of land and to grant such grand titles as First Royal Son of the Goddess Nekhbet—old-fashioned, defiant feudal lords, whose reactionary mode of life was of no benefit to the general welfare and had long been a thorn in the side of the new state. As a statesman, Joseph used this opportunity to coerce these lords to join the times. They were the primary targets of the expropriations and resettlements we are told about, for what this wise and resolute minister accomplished was to break up whatever large estates still existed and resettle smaller ones with tenant farmers whom the state held responsible for applying up-to-date farming methods and installing irrigation systems. This resulted therefore in both land's being distributed more equably among the people and an improved agriculture under supervision by the crown. Many a First Royal Son became just another tenant farmer or moved to the city; many a large

farmer was banished to one of these new farms within smaller boundaries, while the fields he had previously owned were transferred to other hands. And if other forms of relocation were also practiced, if, as we are told, the Lord of Bread "dispersed" people by whole cities—that is, sent them out into districts surrounding population centers, moving them from one tilled field to another—such measures were based on a well-thought-out plan for educating them in this transformed concept of property, by which it was both abolished and preserved.

This essential precondition for all delivery of seed corn by the state was nothing more than the continuation of the duty based on the beautiful number five, of that same tax by which Joseph had amassed these magical supplies during the years of plenty and into which he now dipped—it was the explanation of that tax in permanence, its consolidation for all time. One should note, however, that this levy, even without the aforementioned resettlements, would have been the only form by which the "sale" of the land along with its owners—for they had included themselves in their proposal—could have been effected. Joseph—who never uttered the words "slavery" or "serfdom" himself, terms for which he understandably had no fondness—has never been sufficiently honored for having taken only token advantage of the landowners' joint decision to sell themselves as a means of preventing their ruin; instead, he put the fact that the land and people were no longer "free" in the old sense to no more exacting use than this inviolable tax of one-fifth, the upshot of which was: that those who were lent seed corn no longer worked exclusively for themselves, but in part for Pharaoh, which is to say for the state, for the public coffers. To that extent, their work was the villeinage of serfs—and every friend of humanity and citizen of humane modernity is free to call it that as long as he is prepared, as logic demands, to apply it to himself as well.

Such a term, however, is an exaggeration when one examines the degree of servitude Joseph imposed upon these people. Had he extracted from them three-quarters or even only half of what they produced, they would have been more sensibly aware that they and their fields no longer belonged to them. But twenty from one hundred—malice itself must concede that this is a limited sort of exploitation. Four-fifths of their harvest was left to them as seed to
sow and grain for them and their little ones to consume—and if we look both edict and estimation squarely in the eye, even to hint that this was slavery would be going too far. The words of gratitude with which those put under this yoke greeted their oppressor resound down through the millennia: “You have saved our lives; let us find grace in the sight of my lord and we will be slaves to Pharaoh.” What more can one want? And should anyone want more, then he should know that Jacob himself, with whom Joseph repeatedly discussed these matters, expressly approved of this tax—that is, in terms of the rate imposed if not of the person to whom it was due. Had he already become a multitude of people, he said, upon whom a polity would have to be imposed, the people of the land would likewise have to regard themselves as no more than custodians of the soil and pay one-fifth in tax—but not to some Horus in his palace, but to Yahweh, for He alone was King and Lord, to Him all fields belonged, and He merely lent us all that we possess. But he indeed recognized that his lordship and son, who had been set apart to rule a heathen world, had to deal with these matters in his own way. And Joseph smiled.

As a concept in the conscious minds of those on whom it was imposed, however, this immutable feudal tax was incongruent with their remaining in their traditional homes and fields. So mild a tax was incapable of awakening in them an understanding of their new situation, of making it self-evident. That was the reason for the resettlement measures—they formed a desirable addition to the duty already imposed, which by itself proved inadequate as a material symbol for convincing the farmers that their property had been “sold” and impressing upon them this new state of affairs. A farmer who remained on the same soil he had always worked would find it easy to hold on to outdated conceptions, and in his forgetfulness he might one day rise up against the claims of the crown. If instead he was required to leave his estate and received another in its place from Pharaoh’s own hand, the feudal nature of the property he held was made far more concrete.

But the remarkable thing was that property still remained property. The mark of freely held personal property is the right to sell and to inherit, and these provisions Joseph let stand. From now on all land in the whole of Egypt belonged to Pharaoh and nonetheless could be sold and inherited. It was not for nothing that we spoke of the magic spell that Joseph’s measures cast over the idea of property; for whenever people tried to direct an inner eye on the notion of “property,” the concept hovered there and shattered into ambiguities that left them staring. What they were trying to fix their eye upon had not been destroyed and canceled, but appeared in a twilight state of yes and no that seemed to melt away and yet abide, that kept them blinking until their minds grew accustomed to it. Joseph’s economic system was a surprising combination of collectivization and individual property rights, a rascal mixture that was perceived as a manifestation of a crafty, mediating deity.

Tradition emphasizes that these reforms did not apply to the land held by the temples; the priestly caste endowed by the state with countless shrines, and especially the estates of Amun-Rê, were left untouched and untaxed. “Only the land of the priests,” it says, “he did not buy.” That, too, was wise—if wisdom is a rascal’s cleverness that knows how to harm its opponent while demonstrating the formality of respect. Forbearance in dealing with Amun and lesser local numina was certainly not what Pharaoh had in mind. He would have been happy to see the god of Karnak plucked and milked, and in his boyish way he argued over this with his Spender of Shade, who, however, had the support of Mama, the god’s mother. With her approval Joseph held to his plan of indulging the common man’s devotion to the old gods of the land, a piety that Pharaoh would have gladly destroyed root and branch in favor of the doctrine of his father in heaven and indeed tried to destroy by other means that Joseph could not prevent; for in his zeal Pharaoh was incapable of grasping the notion that the people would prove much more amenable to purification by the new if at the same time they were permitted to hold to their traditional faith and familiar rituals. When it came to Amun, Joseph would have considered it a mistake to give the ram-headed god the impression that the entire agrarian reform was directed against him with the intention to belittle him, rousing him to stir up the people against it. It was far better to hold him in check by gestures of polite consideration. The events of all these years—the abundance, the precautionary measures, the rescue of the people—weighed more than enough in favor of Pharaoh and his spiritual prestige; and the riches from sale of grain that Joseph
had passed on and continued to pass on to the Great House were indirectly such a heavy loss for the imperial god that any little reverence paid to his sacred and traditional freedom from taxation verged on pure irony—and indeed put that laughter in their shepherd's eyes that people noticed accompanied all his actions.

Even those tools of propaganda offered to the stern god of Karnak by Pharaoh's unconditional pacifism and total rejection of war were taken from his hand or at least lost their effectiveness as a result of Joseph's system of supply and mortgage, which for a while at least was able to restrain the audacity always evoked in humankind by power that has turned gentle and renounced violence. The sweet disposition of a late heir to the empire of Thutmoses the Conqueror brought with it great dangers, for word quickly spread among nations round about that in the land of Egypt the tone was no longer being set by Amun-Rê, but by a tender-hearted divinity of blossoms and twittering birds, who was unwilling, no matter what, to dye the imperial sword red—and it would have been an offense to universal common sense not to lead a god like that around by the nose. A taste for impudence, defection, and betrayal began to spread. The eastern provinces that owed tribute—from the land of Seir to Mount Carmel—were in turmoil. There was an unmistakable move toward independence among the princes of Syrian cities, who were relying on the Hatti's warlike incursions to the south, and at the same time the Bedouin savages to the east and south were pillaging Pharaoh's cities and, having likewise heard that kindness now reigned, took outright possession of some of them. Amun's daily call for the vigorous deployment of power—although intended primarily to apply to domestic politics and directed against the "doctrine"—was only too justified in terms of foreign affairs, proved a vexingly persuasive appeal by the heroic old god to resist this refined new one, and was a source of great worry about his father in heaven to Pharaoh. The famine and Joseph, however, came to his aid; they robbed Amun's appeal of much of its force by holding the wobbling petty kings of Asia in economic restraints; and such rigor, though perhaps not carried out with the mildness of Atôn but with purposeful ruthlessness, can be regarded as minor considering that it spared Pharaoh from dyeing his sword red. The cries of pain of those bound to Pharaoh's throne with golden chains of this sort were often shrill enough to have found their way down to us today, but all in all are not likely to leave us melting with sympathy. Granted, they had to send not only silver and wood down to Egypt in exchange for grain, but also young family members as hostages and security—a hardship to be sure, but not one to break our hearts, since we know that these Asiatic royal children received excellent care at elegant boarding schools in Thebes and Menfe and benefited from a better education there than they would have enjoyed at home. "To that land," the lament was, and still is, heard, "are gone their sons, their daughters, and the wooden furnishings of their houses." But about whom is this said? About Mikkili, for example, the ruler of the city of Ashdod; and we know a thing or two about him indicating that his love for Pharaoh was not the most reliable and might very well have needed to be reinforced by the presence of his wife and children in Egypt.

In short, we cannot bring ourselves to see in any of these things marks of some special cruelty, which was not part of Joseph's character, but are much more inclined, as were the people he "led," to recognize in them the tricks of a clever servant, of a versatile divinity with a laughing eye. Even far beyond Egypt's borders, this was the general opinion of Joseph's administration. It was a source of laughter and admiration—and what better reward can a man earn among his fellows than admiration, which by binding their souls together frees them at the same time for high delight.

**Obedience**

For what remains to be told, one needs to be a realist and to keep in mind the relative ages of the persons involved in these events—concerning which poetry and painting have largely encouraged false views among the broader public. This does not apply, to be sure, to Jacob, who is always depicted on his deathbed as an almost blind old man of very advanced years. (Indeed, in the final years of his life his eyesight obviously deteriorated; to some extent Jacob made a point of the fact and, following the pattern of Isaac, the blind bestower of blessing, exploited it to enhance his look of solemnity.) But as regards Joseph and his brothers, who were also Jacob's sons, public imagination is inclined to preserve them at a certain age and ascribe