

Joseph' Sexual Harassment

Genesis 39

Sermon by Dan Schrock

September 21, 2014

Now Joseph was taken down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. ²The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man; he was in the house of his Egyptian master. ³His master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hands. ⁴So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him; he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. ⁵From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and field. ⁶So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge; and, with him there, he had no concern for anything but the food that he ate. Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking.

⁷And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." ⁸But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Look, with me here, my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand. ⁹He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"

¹⁰And although she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not consent to lie beside her or to be with her. ¹¹One day, however, when he went into the house to do his work, and while no one else was in the house, ¹²she caught hold of his garment, saying, "Lie with me!" But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside.

¹³When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled outside, ¹⁴she called out to the members of her household and said to them, "See, my husband has brought among us a Hebrew to insult us! He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice; ¹⁵and when he heard me raise my voice and cry out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside." ¹⁶Then she kept his garment by her until his master came home, ¹⁷and she told him the same story, saying, "The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to insult me; ¹⁸but as soon as I raised my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside."

¹⁹When his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, saying, "This is the way your servant treated me," he became enraged. ²⁰And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; he remained there in prison. ²¹But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. ²²The chief jailer committed to Joseph's care all the prisoners who were in the prison, and whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. ²³The chief jailer paid no heed to anything that was in Joseph's care, because the Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper.

This story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife is a clear-cut case of sexual harassment in the workplace. Sometimes we think the Bible has an ancient feel to it, that its stories come from so far away and so long ago that they don't have any congruence with our context and our situation. Despite the fact that it's at least 2,500 years old, this story feels surprisingly modern. The employee, Joseph, is first sexually harassed and then unjustly accused by one of his employers. The harasser goes unpunished and Joseph loses his job.

According to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, it's illegal to harass someone because of that person's sex. Sexual harassment can

include unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature. Harassment might just be making offensive remarks about a person's gender, such as making offensive comments about women in general or men in general. Sexual harassment can come from either men or women, and be directed at either men or women. Sometimes the victim and the harasser can be the same gender. Harassers can be a supervisor, a co-worker, a client, or a customer.¹

One of the more public instances of sexual harassment happened last fall at the *Scientific American* magazine, when the editor of online blogs, Bora Zivkovic, was fired for sexually harassing a number of female bloggers under his oversight. After he was fired, one blogger, Jennifer Ouellette, typed a thoughtful response to the mess in which she told about a case many years before when she herself was the target of sexual harassment in another publishing company. I'll let her tell the story in her own words.

[When it happened] I was just 22, quiet, painfully shy, and achingly naive, working as a copy editor at a publishing company. One of the male senior staff offered to buy me a friendly drink after work, just to welcome me to the fold. I thought it was a little weird but didn't want to appear impolite when I was just starting a new job, plus I didn't know many people yet, so I agreed. More than 20 years later, I still vividly recall the sudden chill when the joke he was telling unexpectedly turned sexually explicit. Very explicit, deliberately so. Leering slightly, he stared intently in my eyes as he savored every naughty detail, oblivious to my attempts to avert his gaze, my crossed arms, my nervous chuckle as I sought escape. It wasn't remotely sexy

¹ http://www.eeoc.gov/laws/types/sexual_harassment.cfm, accessed April 4, 2014.

or erotic; he sounded like a horny 12-year-old sniggering over Daddy's old *Hustler* rags.

I told him that I needed to get home, [and] insisted on paying for my own drink because I didn't want to feel obligated in any way to this man. He remained oblivious, taking my elbow as we walked down the street, leaning close and murmuring that it was too bad he'd given up his apartment in the city because then we could have gone there for the night. I was stunned. Did he honestly think he had a . . . chance . . . of getting me into bed? Had he really not noticed my growing discomfort, my stiff posture, my instinctive pulling away, my incredulous expression at the very idea of sleeping with him?

. . . This man was senior to me, but he was not my direct superior and he mostly left me alone once he'd determined I wasn't an easy mark, apart from occasionally brushing against me in the hall . . . and giving a knowing smirk. . . . It poisoned my experience on the job. I was wary of socializing with co-workers after-hours, even in groups. . . I largely kept to myself, and leapt at the first new employment opportunity that came my way. Later, I heard through the grapevine that he'd been cited for sexual harassment; apparently he'd been sending anonymous dirty emails regularly over the company servers to a female colleague, who tracked him down and reported the abuse.²

² Adapted from Jennifer Ouellette, "Jeepers, Creepers: What Does Sexual Harassment Look Like?" <http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/cocktail-party-physics/2013/10/22/jeepers-creepers-what-does-sexual-harassment-look-like/>, accessed April 4, 2014.

In the context of modern stories about sexual harassment, Genesis 39 feels quite contemporary. Joseph, a “handsome and good-looking” young man (v. 6), gets a job on the estate of Potiphar, a high-ranking Egyptian who captains the soldiers charged with protecting Pharaoh. We might think of Potiphar as the head of Pharaoh’s Secret Service. This detail suggests that Potiphar could be a person of significant wealth who lives in a large house on an estate with fertile land.

Joseph is Potiphar’s employee; but he’s also a slave. Remember that back in the land of Canaan, Joseph had been sold to slave traders by his jealous brothers. The slave traders forcibly marched Joseph south into Egypt, where in turn they sold him to Potiphar, no doubt making a nice profit. Seeing a great deal of promise in his new slave, Potiphar gradually gives Joseph more and more responsibility until finally, Joseph is overseeing all of Potiphar’s economic resources. The story hints that Potiphar trusts Joseph so much that he gets lazy. Verse 6 says Potiphar “left all that he had in Joseph’s charge” so that Potiphar “had no concern for anything but the food he ate.” The author makes it sound as if Potiphar gives himself over to gluttony—that his sole concern in life has become eating and drinking.

If Potiphar becomes inattentive, Potiphar’s wife becomes overly attentive. She “cast her eyes” on Joseph and bluntly says to him: “Lie with me” (v. 7). This isn’t a seductive hint or roundabout sexual innuendo. Instead it’s a command, an order to “have sex with me.” Throughout the ancient Mediterranean world it was common practice for masters and mistresses to quietly have sex with their slaves. In such a situation where the mistress is demanding sex, Joseph is faced with a nasty dilemma: should he say yes or should he resist?

Maybe Joseph is tempted to say yes. Maybe Potiphar’s wife is as attractive to him, as he is to her. Maybe his hormones stir in glee. But Joseph resists, perhaps

because he remembers the nasty consequences that happened after his own great-grandfather Abraham had sex with one of his slaves, Hagar (Genesis 16). Whatever the reasons, Joseph decides to live by a higher ethic. So he refuses, even though Potiphar's wife keeps hounding him for sex. Finally the day comes when the house is empty and Potiphar's wife pushes her harassment to new levels: she forcibly grabs Joseph. He of course slips away, but only by sliding out of his outer garment.

The lust in Potiphar's wife quickly shifts to rage and revenge. In possession of Joseph's clothes, she now has the means to frame him unjustly for the crime of attempted rape, which of course Joseph is completely innocent of. This happens too often in cases of sexual harassment, where the perpetrator gets away with the crime by falsely painting himself or herself as the victim. Chapter 39 ends with Joseph unjustly in prison for a crime he did not commit.

However, this story tells us again and again that God is on Joseph's side. Eight times the narrator says something like "the LORD was with Joseph" or "the LORD made him prosper" (vv. 2, 3, 5, 21, 23). As a slave in a foreign land, as the target of sexual harassment, and as a prisoner falsely accused, Joseph is currently having a hard, stressful life.

But God is on his side—and because of that Joseph will ultimately prevail. He will get out of jail and find an even better job than the one he had under Potiphar. For people targeted by sexual harassment, this story offers comfort, courage, and hope. God is with you.