Illustration of the “Triumph” of Joseph the Patriarch

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The popularity of the story of Joseph as a subject for artistic expression in many different media during the early Christian and mediaeval periods is no doubt due in part to the nature of the Genesis narrative itself; its inherently dramatic and human qualities make it an attractive subject for the artist.

But it was especially the typological possibilities of Joseph’s story which very early were exploited in both text and image to underline the relationship between the old and new covenants. An interpretation of Joseph’s life supplied by the fifth century Bishop of Ravenna, Peter Chrysologus, illustrates in a representative way how the Old Testament personage symbolically prefigured Christ’s passion: in Sermon 146, Chrysologus states:

“Joseph incurs jealousy because of his prophetic dreams, Christ provokes envy because of his prophetic visions; Joseph is lowered into the pit of death and emerges from it alive, Christ is delivered to the sepulchre and returns alive; Joseph is bartered, Christ is sold at a price; Joseph is brought to Egypt, it is to Egypt that Christ flees; Joseph provides abundant bread to the hungering people, Christ satisfies the nations of the entire world with heavenly bread.”

Thus Professor Stričivic has argued recently that the fourteen Joseph scenes on the famous ivory cathedra of Maximianus at Ravenna should be seen as representing, and in fact taking the place of, the scenes of Christ’s passion. If this hypothesis is accepted, the Old Testament story becomes a part of a life of Christ cycle, and the account of the passion is told allegorically, by a series of episodes from the story of Joseph.

Certainly we do have evidence that events from Joseph’s life were used in art in the early centuries for purposes of typological parallelism. The fourth-century decorative programme of the Lateran basilica in Rome featured a series of such typological depictions, probably including the sale of Joseph to the Ishmaelite merchants, which appeared opposite the illustration of Christ’s betrayal by Judas. Again, in the sixth century, a set of concordant tituli from Ravenna pairs the same two scenes. But these are selected scenes, in each case a part of a series of concordant Old and New Testament illustrations. Nothing in early Christian art quite prepares us for a full exchange of Lives, as it were, such as Professor Stričivic suggests has taken place on the chair of Maximianus.

Whether or not such a thorough utilization of the typological potential of the Joseph story was made in the sixth century, mediaeval exegesis in the West continued and elaborated this idea of Joseph as an ante-type of Christ. In the Glossa ordinaria, in works of Vincent of Beauvais and Isidore of Seville and in the introduction of the Bobbio Missal, the idea is explored with varying degrees of confidence and imagination. Artistic expression of such typological
interpretations of Joseph's life appears in the windows of French Gothic cathedrals. In addition to the theological weight given to the Joseph story, early Christian and mediaeval exegesis also made use of the narrative as a moral exemplar. This, in fact, began with Philo, who saw the patriarch as an ideal statesman and ruler: "a most admirable supervisor and arbiter in times of both famine and plenty". As Schapiro has pointed out, Christian writers, including Saint Ambrose, Saint Paulinus of Nola and Cassiodorus, all celebrate Joseph's many virtues and recommend him as an example of humility, chastity, modesty, temperance and filial devotion. Saint Ambrose, in particular, probably inspired by Philo, finds him a perfect administrator and statesman and hence the model of an excellent priest and bishop.

The miniatures of mediaeval moralized bibles demonstrate how both typological and moral exegesis could be combined to illustrate biblical narratives. A folio from a thirteenth-century French Bible moralisée exemplifies this treatment of the narrative in relation to the Joseph story. (Plate 1). Four medallions with episodes from the Joseph story are paralleled with four scenes chosen either from Christ's life or from contemporary practice and behaviour, in order to extract a moral lesson from the Joseph exemplar. The first two medallions juxtapose Joseph's "Triumph", his honouring and promotion by Pharaoh who "made him to ride in the second chariot which he had", with Christ's Ascension. The accompanying text clarifies Joseph's position as an ante-type of Christ: the patriarch's glory prefigures that of Christ, while the Egyptians who bow the knee to him prefigure the disciples who adore Christ at His Ascension. The final two medallions derive a moral lesson for Christians from Jacob's willingness to listen to the news of an abundance of corn in Egypt, made possible by Joseph's foresight. Christians will be equally well-rewarded by listening to the truth from preachers, who are the messengers of Christ.

The artist can underline the suggestion of Joseph's life as an ante-type of Christ's by formal means. The compositions of the first two medallions centre around the pivotal figures of Joseph and Christ, while gestures of secondary figures in the Joseph medallion are echoed in the Ascension scene. Similar formal repetitions are used to link the scenes which together focus on a desirable Christian virtue. Thus the selection of scenes, their presentation and composition can all be directly affected by the theological and moral context in which they are meant to be viewed.

In many cases it can be shown that social and cultural factors also have influenced the manner in which a particular scene is depicted, and the purpose of this paper is to isolate differences in the depiction of the Triumph of Joseph and to venture some suggestions about reasons for such diversity. There seems to be some evidence to suggest that Byzantine artists were more prepared than their Western counterparts to employ imagery familiar through imperial iconography, including contemporary ideas and rituals of kingship, to illustrate Joseph's triumph.

Early Christian art provides little assistance in gauging how the scene of Joseph's appearance in the second chariot of Pharaoh was depicted in the first few centuries. Some Joseph cycles like that contained in the Vienna Genesis are incomplete and the appropriate folios are missing; while in others, such as the chair of Maximianus, the only scenes which express the idea of Joseph's triumph