

## Stith Thompson - The Folktale p 138

Even animals are valued as prophets. One old tale popular with both priests and rabbis of the Middle Ages (21) is about The Boy Who Learned Many Things (Type 517). The hero understands the language of birds.(23) One day he hears them prophesy that his parents shall humble themselves before him. He repeats the prophecy, and his parents drive him away. The boy has many adventures and becomes a great man. He returns unknown to his parents and the prophecy is fulfilled.

Though this tale has been collected orally, at least once, in practically every country of Europe, it is essentially a literary story and cannot be thought of as a product of folk imagination. We recognize clearly enough something of the biblical account of Joseph, though several other stories which we shall now look at are even closer to that legend in general outline and in detail. Such is the tale which we may call The Dream (Type 725) in which the hero, like Joseph, dreams that his parents shall serve him and that the king shall pour water on his hands. Unlike Joseph, the hero is loath to tell his dream and persistently refuses to. He has a long series of adventures. He successfully solves riddles; he performs difficult tasks suggested by a hostile prince; he overcomes his enemies and wins a princess. As in the other tale, the prophecy is fulfilled and the parents humble themselves before their successful son.

The general outline of this story is old. Whether the literary versions of the Middle Ages, such as the accounts of the life of Pope Sylvester II and of Pope Innocent III, are based eventually upon the Joseph tale, it has certainly long been popular.(23) As an oral legend, it seems to be told mostly in eastern Europe, especially in Hungary and the Baltic states.

(21). Among other places, the tale appears in the *Seven Sages*, in the *Scala Celi*, and some Jewish exempla collections. There are Czech and Armenian chapbooks relating this tale. For a discussion of its literary history, see Bolte-Pollvka, I, 323. .

(22). For several other stories about men who understand the language of birds and other animals, see pp. 83ff., above.

(23). See Bolte-Polivka, I, 324f.

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Some royal legends have attached themselves to the popes. One of these, known also in folktales (Type 671) and in Oriental and classical tradition, is associated with Gerbert, whose election to the papacy is said to have been decided by the lighting of a bird. In similar tales horses or elephants determine the choice of ruler, and sometimes the future pope's candle lights itself (H41.3).(62)

(62). For these legends of popes, see [J. J. I. von Döllinger, \*Die Papst-Fabeln des Milteralters\*](#) (2nd ed., Stuttgart, 1890). Another interesting papal legend is that of Pope Joan, the woman in disguise who is supposed to have served as a pope (K1961.2.1).