



Genesis

SESSION 3—GENESIS 37:1–36; 41:1–57; 45:1–15; 50:1–26

| *Joseph and God's Providential Care*

Introduction

In session 3 we turn to the story of Joseph. Because of time constraints we have passed over Genesis 24–36 and moved to Joseph, the favored son of Jacob's first eleven children.

The concluding chapters of Genesis (37–50) constitute what is sometimes called a novella or a short story. It appears to have been written by one person. While there are two engaging chapters that break the narrative (Judah and Tamar, 38:1–30; Jacob's last words, 49:1–28), basically the story, primarily about Joseph, is developed steadily to a dramatic conclusion.

The Joseph story connects the preceding account in Genesis about Jacob with what will follow in the book of Exodus. The story begins, "Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. This is the story of the family of Jacob" (37:1–2). The story tells how the family of Jacob, because of Joseph, migrated to Egypt, prospered there, and finally became more unified. Stories about individuals that have been the focus in Genesis up to this point give way to the story of a family and how they did and did not live into the divine purpose set before them.

Joseph the Dreamer

As the story opens, Joseph is a seventeen-year-old, living in Canaan with his family and tending the flocks with two of his half brothers (37:2). Joseph was the seventh son born to Jacob (30:22–24). As "the son of his old age," Joseph was the favorite of his father (37:3). He did have a younger brother, Benjamin (35:17–19), who later in the story was deemed most important after Joseph was believed to have died.



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Some of his brothers hated Joseph for two reasons. They considered him a tattletale because he "brought a bad report" to Jacob concerning their behavior (37:2). Second, they resented him because of his favored status with their father, who had made for Joseph alone a special garment. In older English translations this garment was called a "coat of many colors," and as such it has found fame in song and art. Now, however, we know that this rare Hebrew term should be translated as "long robe with sleeves" (37:3–4). This type of long-sleeved robe was worn as a sign of authority. Because Jacob had given this garment to Joseph, the brothers' envy and dislike of Joseph increased.

The story advances with Joseph relating two dreams he had to his father and brothers. In antiquity dreams were considered one of the main ways that deities communicated with human beings. Dreams were not taken casually or easily explained away as the result of eating too much of the wrong things. Dreams were serious business, and Joseph had experienced two. In the first dream Joseph was in a field binding sheaves with his brothers. Suddenly his sheaf rose and stood up, and those of his brothers bowed down to it (37:6–7). His brothers understood the dream to mean that Joseph was to rule over them, and they hated him all the more (37:5, 8).

Joseph's second dream was similar. He dreamed that "the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down" to him (37:9). The family was quite agitated by the report of this dream. Jacob rebuked Joseph scornfully, asking whether Jacob and the whole family were to bow down to Joseph (37:10). By the way Jacob phrased the "question," he in effect said, No way! Joseph's dream was quite disturbing to his father and fueled the disdain his brothers already had for him (37:11).

As a reaction to Joseph's dreams, his brothers decided to get rid of him. When Joseph, sent by his father, came to check on his brothers, they hatched a plot to kill him. They tore off his long-sleeved robe so they could use it to convince their father that he had been killed by wild animals, and then they threw him into a pit to die of thirst (37:12–24). As it turned out, however, Joseph was pulled from the pit by a group of Midianites who in turn sold him to Ishmaelite traders on their way to Egypt (37:25–28). The Hebrew text is ambiguous about who actually sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites (his brothers or the Midianites?), but in the end Joseph was again sold, to an Egyptian official named Potiphar (37:36).

After Joseph had been pulled from the pit and taken away, the brothers took Joseph's garment, dipped it in the blood of a slaughtered goat, and took it to Jacob (37:29–35). Jacob recognized the shredded robe immediately and assumed that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal. He then went into inconsolable mourning for his lost son (37:33–35).

Because of his dreams—actually because of sibling rivalry and parental favoritism—Joseph ended up a slave in Egypt. This was certainly bad news for Joseph, but as the story progresses we will learn that God's providence was able to bring something positive out of the human malice that had created this gross injustice.

Joseph's Rise to Power

Joseph's stay in Egypt began on a down note and quickly went lower. The wife of his new master Potiphar tried unsuccessfully to seduce him (39:7–12), then lied about it, saying he had tried to rape her (39:13–18). As a result Potiphar had him put into prison (39:19–20). But the narrator assures the reader that "the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love" by bringing him into favor with the head jailer, who gave him a measure of privilege and put him in charge of the other prisoners (39:21–23).

During the time he was in the jail Joseph gained a reputation for being able to interpret dreams. He was asked to interpret the dreams of two former members of Pharaoh's court who had fallen into disfavor, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker (40:1–8). After hearing the dreams, Joseph announced that the chief cupbearer would be restored to his former position (40:9–13), but the chief baker would be executed (40:16–19). Three days later that was exactly what happened (40:20–22). Though Joseph asked the chief cupbearer to seek help in releasing him from prison (40:14–15), the "chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him" (40:23).

The episodes of Joseph's dreaming (37:5–10) and interpreting dreams (40:5–19) serve as introduction to the event that was to redefine Joseph's circumstance. Two years after Joseph's dream interpretation work in the prison, Pharaoh had two dreams that no one in his court was able to interpret (41:1–8). Pharaoh was greatly disturbed by this. At that point the cupbearer remembered Joseph and told Pharaoh about his experience in prison (41:9–13). Thereupon Joseph was cleaned up and brought to Pharaoh (41:14).

Pharaoh told his dreams to Joseph because he had heard that Joseph excelled in giving interpretation. Joseph said, "It is not I; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer" (41:16). The substance of the dreams was that there were soon to be seven prosperous years followed by seven lean years. Joseph urged Pharaoh to appoint overseers to make sure that reserves of grain and other food were built during the years of plenty in order to be able to survive the years of famine (41:17–36).

Pharaoh was so impressed with Joseph's wisdom that he appointed him to do all that he had suggested. Joseph was put in charge of all of Pharaoh's land (41:37–41) and given all the privileges and deference that went with being Pharaoh's right-hand man (41:42–44). Pharaoh gave Joseph an Egyptian name, Zaphenath-paneah; an Egyptian wife, Asenath; and total authority (41:45). At the age of thirty Joseph's situation had improved beyond all expectations (41:46). In the next years he carried out the plans for storage of food that he had suggested (41:47–49), and his wife, Asenath, bore him two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim (41:50–52).

When the years of famine came, Joseph was ready. As the need for food became critical, Joseph opened the storage houses and sold what was needed to the Egyptians and



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to all others who came (41:53–57). Joseph was still Pharaoh’s slave, but one who had risen to a place where he was able to determine the life or death of many, even his own family. The brat who had pushed his siblings to the point of murder was now in a place where he could become their deliverer.

Several comments need to be made at this point. There is no way to prove the historicity of this account. Joseph is nowhere mentioned in the vast Egyptian records discovered to date. But the information is certainly consistent with all we know from this time and place. The names are Egyptian. The form of government fits what we know. Periods of famine and plenty are well documented for the region. There was an active slave trade between Mesopotamia and Egypt that passed through Canaan. Semitic groups did pass back and forth into Egypt seeking good pastures and buying food during famines. And perhaps most surprising, there are records of slaves who were set in positions of great authority and who carried out their responsibilities well. So while the account cannot be historically proven, it certainly fits well with what we know of Egypt during the second millennium BCE.

From the narrator’s point of view the whole sequence of events thus far described bore the mark of God’s mysterious guidance. Against all odds, Joseph had risen from a pit intended for his death to become a man with life-giving power. Divine providence was at work to shape this sometimes quarreling and obnoxious family into something new. The family of Jacob was on the verge of becoming Israel, the people.

Joseph with His Brothers

The years of famine did not spare Joseph’s family. As the famine spread in Canaan, Joseph’s father, Jacob, heard that there was grain for purchase in Egypt. He sent ten of his sons, Joseph’s brothers, to get some (42:1–3). He did not send Benjamin, Joseph’s younger and only full

brother, for fear that something bad might happen to him (42:4–5).

The story that unfolds is full of drama. Joseph immediately recognized his brothers when they came to buy grain, but they did not realize they were dealing with their brother (42:8). There is a detailed story about how Joseph imprisoned his brothers, charging them with being spies (42:6–17). Then he released all of them but Simeon, who, they were told, would be released if they would bring Benjamin from Canaan (42:18–24). Though they did not know they were dealing with Joseph, the brothers interpreted their difficulty as recompense for what they had done years earlier (42:21–22).

The story gets all the more complex with the brothers going back and forth, finally persuading their very reluctant father to let Benjamin go with them to Egypt. After pledging to take special care of Benjamin, they returned, taking a number of gifts for the “man in charge” in Egypt, Joseph (42:26–43:10). After their meeting and a lavish meal (43:16–34), Joseph arranged a trick whereby Benjamin was retained, resulting in a long plea on Judah’s part for Benjamin’s release (44:1–34). (David the son of Jesse came from the tribe of Judah. He founded the united kingdom that later split in 922 BCE into the kingdoms of Judah and Israel.)

The details in the story are engaging. The drama holds the reader’s attention. But, we ask, was all this really necessary? Why didn’t Joseph reveal his identity to his brothers immediately? Was he merely being vindictive? Some will say that the story is what it is—that is the way it happened. Others will say that the narrator has built in tension for the sake of telling a great story. However the question is resolved, the way the story is constructed allows us to learn a great deal about the way the family matured over the years. Judah is shown to have become much more sensitive and caring about his brother and father (43:8–10; 44:18–34). The other brothers also show a deepening sense of moral culpability and responsibility that has developed since their earlier years (42:21–22, 26–28; 43:18–22; 44:7–9). And certainly Joseph, as we shall see in chapter 45, moved beyond what might have been spitefulness to a genuine affection for his brothers.

The climax of this part of the story comes when Joseph finally reveals his identity to his brothers. The brothers, along with a number of others, were gathered before Joseph, and as the text puts it, “Joseph could no longer

control himself before all those who stood by him” (45:1). Joseph sent everyone but his brothers from the room. Then he wept loudly and told his brothers who he was (45:2–3). Next follows what the whole story was about, at least from the narrator’s point of view. Joseph says, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. . . . to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God” (45:4–8). Joseph then told his brothers to return to Canaan and assure Jacob that Joseph was alive. They were then to bring Jacob to live in Egypt with land and supplies furnished by Pharaoh (45:9–20). Jacob and the whole clan did leave Beer-sheba and moved to Egypt (46:5–27).

In this moving account it is amazing to see Joseph reach out to those who had so deeply wronged him. His reasoning, however, has to be qualified. Just because something turns out relatively positive cannot always be taken as evidence that God did it. Human misbehavior is still wrong, even if the circumstances can be turned to bring something good from it. God should be understood as concerned about our lives, but human responsibility is still important and remains a measuring mark. Sometimes people are tempted to take the idea that God is at work in our midst as an excuse to keep muddling along hoping that things will work out. That is not the way divine providence is to be understood.

Passing on the Promise

Jacob lived with his family in Egypt for seventeen years (47:28). Toward the end of Jacob’s life, Joseph brought his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, to see their grandfather (48:1–2). (Much later the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh who occupied the hill country north of Jerusalem were at the center of what came to be the kingdom of Israel, which rivaled the kingdom of Judah from 922 to 722 BCE, when Judah was destroyed by the Assyrians.) For the first time, so far as the story is concerned, Jacob told one of his sons, Joseph, about the promise God had made of

progeny and land and explained that the promise was to be extended to Joseph and Joseph’s sons, and to Joseph’s brothers and their sons (48:4–7). No longer was the promise to rest with a single individual. When Jacob died, after receiving full Egyptian burial rites his body was carried back to Canaan and buried alongside his forebears in the cave of Machpelah in Hebron (49:29–50:14).

The story is almost concluded, but not quite. Joseph’s brothers began to worry whether Joseph might still hold a grudge against them (50:15). At this point we reach the ultimate climax when Joseph responds to his brothers’ concern, saying, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today” (50:19–20). Thus the promise first given to Abraham and Sarah was passed on to Joseph and the whole family of Jacob.

Conclusion

The story of Joseph ends on a note of mystery. How can we know God’s plans? Interpreting the work of God in the midst of all the good and bad in the world must be done carefully. Humans are expected to act responsibly in cooperation with God. We are not simply to accept the injustices in our world as the “will of God.” At the same time, as Joseph’s story suggests, we can rest assured that God does care and is able to bring good from the worst situations.

We have seen in these three sessions the way God’s concern for humankind was expressed in a number of ways. From creation to the providential care of Joseph and Jacob’s clan, God’s graciousness and care are portrayed with boldness. God our Creator is also God our Guide and Sustainer.

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