PARALLEL GUIDE 11 The Joseph Novel

Summary: More lengthy but more cohesive than the preceding sagas, the Joseph story bridges the ancient patriarchal narratives to the bondage in Egypt and the Exodus. Joseph embodies God's universal love and power. Through this ideal young man's fidelity and forgiveness, "all the earth" survives a great famine, and what humanity (represented by his treacherous brothers) intends for evil, God uses for good.

Learning Objectives

- Read Genesis 37:1-36, 38:1-30, 39-50:26
- Define "levirate marriage"
- State why the text includes the story of Judah and Tamar
- State why Joseph's dreams threatened his brothers
- State the significance of Jacob's adoption of Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh
- State the main theme of the Joseph saga

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. Describe the view of death involved in the notion of Sheol. Record it in your notebook.

2. Reflecting on holy scripture stimulates associations with other things. For example, a particular Bible story may carry associations with past experiences. "Noah and the Ark," when told to a person, may bring memories of childhood because she heard it often as a child. Every time she hears the story, she recalls the feelings and thoughts of her past. Part of her identity becomes associated with the story because the experience contributed to who she is today.

These associations are important because through them we discover our identities and significance. A poetic image contains a power beyond its surface meaning. It is as if the imagery becomes alive through our associations. These images and metaphors can become like vessels carrying the waters of meaning for our lives.

The program's Four-Source Model (Common Lessons and Supporting Materials, Section 2-10) presents the categories Tradition, Culture, Position, and Action. Reading scripture for its associative power provides a way to draw together these sources of meaning for our lives.

Take a page in your notebook and title it "Associations Exercise." Read Genesis 50:14-21 several times and allow your mind to associate freely with the images contained in the reading. Write down whatever comes to your mind as you con- sider the passage. Write as much or as little as you want.

Reread your notes, considering the sources of your thoughts. Mark each thought with a T, C, A, or P to indicate its source and record any new thoughts, learn- ings, or questions.

3. On a map of the region, trace out Joseph's travels and the path which Jacob's sons must have followed. What are the political implications? Do some research in your local library and see if you can identify just who Pharaoh was at the time Joseph lived.

Preparing for Your Seminar

What are your thoughts about the world events that seem most threatening or dangerous to you? Are there

any signs that God may be working for good through them? How do you decide this?

How many instances in your own life can you recall in which God has brought good out of evil? On what basis do you believe that this was God's doing?

Additional Sources

A good introduction (or review) of the Joseph story is found in W. L. Humphreys' article "The Joseph Story" in the Supplement to The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (491-493).

Several fictional treatments of the story are also available, perhaps the most interesting of which is Thomas Mann's long novel *Joseph*.

Chapter 11
THE JOSEPH NOVEL

The Abraham and Jacob sagas are made up of many separate stories from different traditions, woven together to make a somewhat consistent unit. The threads which bind together the different items in the sagas are the theological concerns of the writer, whose purpose is to show Israel's understanding of herself by means of the stories of these fathers of the nation. The Joseph story is quite different. While made up of J, E, and P versions edited together, the story itself is a single cohesive one. It probably was edited into a form close to what we now have by people who made up the courts of kings David and Solomon. It gives a picture of the ideal young man for a kingdom that was just beginning to think of itself as an international power. Joseph is handsome, clever, and gracious, and he also enjoys that which neither heredity nor upbringing can give—YHWH's favor. He becomes a model man, although his early behavior was not very promising. As one expression of Israel's own self-understanding, Joseph typifies the nation at its best.

Beneath the pleasant and inspiring surface level of the story lies a more profound dimension of significance. Chapter 50:20 states the heart of it: sold into slavery by his brothers, Joseph nevertheless has risen to a position of great power in Egypt, and his brothers have come to him to plead for food in a time of great famine. When they discover whom they are dealing with, they are naturally anxious; but Joseph settles their fears of his anger and possible vengeance by saying, "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." The foolishness and evil of human beings can be converted or used by God to the furtherance of his purposes. Sin is overcome by God not by making it impossible for it to occur—for this would deny human freedom and make us something less than the image of God—but by turning it to God's good ends. Further, it is not only his brothers Joseph rescues, but "all the earth who came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth."

Joseph is, in a sense, a universal savior: through him "all the earth" is able to survive the famine. This motif of Israel as universal savior, which we have seen stated in brief form in the call of Abraham, is developed at great length in the part of the book of Isaiah which is usually called "Second Isaiah"—from chapter 40 on—where Israel's special election, or vocation, to be a "light to the nations," a universal savior nation, is stated in terms of the "suffering servant" of God. It is probably not accidental that the insights of Second Isaiah and the editing of the present form of the Joseph story took place at about the same time.

The story of Tamar in chapter 38 is an interlude in the Joseph story. It seems to break the flow and probably should be read separately from the rest of the story, although it does cover several years and so allows the Joseph story to be resumed after Joseph has grown to adulthood. At any rate, we read and discuss Gen. 38 first. Then you should read Gen. 37, and 39-50, the story of Joseph, at one sitting. As we look through it, we

discuss the more important and puzzling details.

Genesis 38:1-11 The Story of Judah and Tamar

These first eleven verses of Gen. 38 give the background for the rest of the story of Judah and Tamar. This is briefly stated, without supporting details. Judah's marriage to a Canaanite woman is accepted as a matter of fact; the insistence on religious purity in marriage, important in later Judaism, is not present here. We are not told why YHWH slays Judah's first son, Er, beyond that he was "wicked in the sight of the LORD" (v. 7). The second son, Onan, is to take Er's wife to produce a son for his brother, but refuses to do so, so he is killed by YHWH also. Judah fears that his third son may also be killed, so refuses to give him in marriage to his brother's widow ".

. . until my son Shelah grows up" (v. 11). Thus, the stage is set: the widow, Tamar, is living in her father's house—disgraced because she has had no child and has been sent away from her husband's house.

This strange custom of expecting a dead man's brother to marry his widow is called levirate marriage and is prescribed in Deuteronomy 25:5 ff. (The term "levirate" is from the Latin, levir, "brother-in-law.") By the terms of the Deuteronomic law, if a man dies without producing a son from his marriage, his widow is not to remarry outside the family if the deceased husband has an unmarried brother. That brother is to marry her, and the first son from this marriage is to carry the name of the first husband, "that his name may not be blotted out of Israel" (Deut. 25:6). Thus, the son by a levirate marriage is considered under the law to be the son of the dead brother and inherits from him.

The importance of this law rests not only on the matter of inheritance, but also on the continuance of the name of the husband. For all practical purposes, there was no belief in a life after death at this time. There was a place where the departed went at death, Sheol[top] (pronounced SHE-ohl), but this was not thought of as a condition of real life. Rather it was a shadowy kind of half-life, a condition of neither reward nor punishment and certainly not one in which any kind of fulfillment might come. (It was for all purposes the same as the Greek notion of Hades. In the Apostles' Creed, the phrase usually translated "he descended into Hell" actually refers to Hades, not the Hell of torment for the damned.) Any fulfillment which a person was to receive, therefore, must occur in this life alone, except for the preservation of the person's name in posterity. Thus the duty of the brother was considered to be very important; so much so that if he declined to do it, the law required that he publicly announce his refusal in the presence of the elders and allow his brother's widow to pull off his sandal and spit in his face (Deut. 25:7-10).

In Deuteronomy, only a brother is commanded to perform this duty, but in this story of Judah and Tamar, as also in the story of Ruth and her kinsman, Boaz, the obligation apparently extends to the next of kin, whoever he may be. This is one indication that the word "brother" in Hebrew may sometimes mean "near relative, whether or not sharing at least one parent." This is a familiar use of language in the church, where we speak of our "brothers and sisters in Christ." The relation of these two stories is of some interest. Both pertain to the David saga, for David is descended from the line of Perez through Boaz. Together the accounts recall that David stems from a strange and non-indigenous line. Tamar was Canaanite, Ruth, a Moabite. Both were widows who seemed likely to remain childless—they claim sons only by the levirate

tradition. David's origins are unlikely, reflecting God's use of the unlikely. God is able to turn fate to his own design, whatever the intentions of God's people. In this, the Tamar story reinforces the main theme of the Joseph novel.

Onan is not willing to perform his duty, knowing that the resulting child will not be his. Instead of declaring his unwillingness publicly, however, he "spilled his semen on the ground" (v. 9). This "sin of Onan" or "onanism" has often been interpreted as masturbation, but it is more likely to have been coitus interruptus.

Genesis 38:12-19

Judah, by now a widower, goes up to a sheep-shearing feast. Tamar hears of it and disguises herself as a prostitute. Hebrew has two words that are translated "prostitute." The Greek historian Herodotus reports he discovered that, in Babylonia, it was required that every woman spend one night as a cult prostitute. Although for a time scholars believed it was possible to make a clear distinction between "cult prostitute" and "regular prostitute," later study has shown this not to be the case. A "cult prostitute" is a woman who takes a vow to enter into sexual relations for the sake of the deity of a particular sanctuary. Besides making money, which the woman turns over to the shrine, it was thought that such sexual acts would—by sympathetic magic—increase the fertility of the land.

Tamar asks Judah to leave his signet cylinder and staff, which would be clearly recognized as his, in pledge for his later payment. He agrees without argument.

Genesis 38:20-30

Tamar disappears—as the prostitute—so Judah cannot redeem what he has left with her. When she is found to be pregnant and Judah calls for her to be burned for adultery, she identifies the father of the baby she carries as the owner of the signet and staff. Judah recognizes them, of course, and acknowledges that she is more righteous than he, since he had refused to give his son Shelah for the levirate marriage and had to be tricked into performing the duty himself.

Once again, in the birth of Perez and Zerah—as in that of Jacob and Esau—we have the motif of a conflict between twins before their birth. This story is probably part of a larger tradition about the clans of Judah, since the names refer to two clans, partially Canaanite in ancestry, who were rivals.

Although many commentators argue that the story is completely out of place and relatively pointless except as a testimony to the practice of levirate marriage, it carries meanings on many levels. Seen in connection with the Book of Ruth, it gives the reference for the major point of that book. The genealogy at the end of the Book of Ruth says that Ruth's son, by Boaz, was Obed, the father of Jesse, who was the father of David the king. Ruth was a Moabite. As for Boaz, the Israelite kinsman of Ruth's deceased Israelite husband and the one who accepted the responsibility of fulfilling the demands of levirate marriage, he is shown to be a descendant of Tamar, the Canaanite woman, through her son Perez. Thus, in the face of extreme demands for exclusivism which were being made at the time of the return from exile, it is asserted that David, the ideal king of Israel, was of mixed blood.

As part of the Joseph saga this chapter continues themes of broken relationships among brothers. For example, Onan does not mind having sexual relations with Tamar, but does not want to raise a son for his brother Er. As Joseph's bloody garment was used to deceive Jacob, so Tamar's prostitute's garb deceives Judah. (And in the following chapter, clothing is again used as "evidence" for what is not true.) Perhaps most important, this chapter contains the evidence of Judah's moral maturation. He grows from a father-in-law who refuses to assume his responsibility for his widowed daughter-in-law and who doesn't want to be laughed at when trying to pay a prostitute, to a man who publicly accepts responsibility for his action3 and even asserts that this foreign woman, Tamar, is more righteous than he. Thus, by the end of the chapter, Judah is seen to be worthy to give his name to the Southern Kingdom.

Genesis 37:1-11 The Jealousy of Joseph's Brothers

The Joseph story begins with the "hero" stirring up ill feelings among his brothers. There is no whitewashing the matter: Joseph is a talebearer. He brings "ill reports" to his father, Jacob, about his brothers Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher, the sons of the maids Zilpah and Bilhah. His father's preference for him, shown by the gift of the long-sleeved robe or ornamented tunic—probably not a "coat of many colors"—but a sign, at any rate, that he was not expected to do manual labor—is resented. Finally, the dreams he has in which he appears to have preeminence over not only his brothers but also his father and mother—although at this point in the story his mother, Rachel, is already dead—upset even his father. Joseph's dreams should not be seen as simply showing vanity on his part. Dreams such as these were looked upon as acts of God by which the spirit of prophecy spoke. They did not merely predict, but, in a sense, caused what was predicted to happen. Note that Jacob pays close attention to the dream. That may be why the brothers plan to kill Joseph—lest he dream (prophesy) more about them.

Genesis 37:12-36 Joseph Is Sold into Slavery

There are two strands woven together in this part of the story. In v. 13, Jacob is referred to as Israel, while in v. 34, he is called Jacob. In vv. 21-24, Reuben saves Joseph from death by having him put in a water cistern, intending to return him to Jacob later; in vv. 26-27, it is Judah who pleads for Joseph's life by suggesting that they sell him to a passing caravan. In the account from v. 25 to the end of the chapter, the identity of the people in the caravan shifts from Ishmaelites to Midianites. The Joseph story is mainly an interweaving of J and E, but the P source also appears from time to time. P can usually be recognized by its interest in genealogies and in the exact ages of the characters. The usual way of telling J from E, the use of the divine names Lord (J) or God (E), is often not helpful in this story. The story is so focused on Joseph, with only occasional reference to God's acts, that we cannot count on this clue. A more useful distinction between the two sources in this story is that J calls Joseph's father Israel, while E calls him Jacob.

In this particular passage, the story is from the J source through v. 27, the coming of the Ishmaelite caravan. In verses 28 ff., the source is mainly E, with the attempt to reconcile the two in 28b where the Midianites sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites. In v. 36, the Midianites sell him to Potiphar in Egypt. It is not possible for us to figure

out "who did what to whom" in this section. Such an impossibility is not necessarily the result of "clumsy" editing. It may be a faithful recounting of the confusion of the event. The brothers were laboring under varying degrees of guilt and relief at being rid of Joseph. In such times of high emotion, memories can often disagree. We need not worry a great deal about sorting out the sections belonging to J or E, for the redactor has woven them together to produce a coherent unity. Chapters 40-42 are predominantly E, and they show E's interest in dreams. The dreams in this story, however, are different from those we usually find in the E source, that is using dreams as a direct means of communication between God and humankind. Here, the dreams can be interpreted only by God's power, but they are not divine communications in themselves.

Note that the confusion about the two caravans and about whether Joseph was sold by his brothers or stolen from the cistern without their knowledge is not important for the story as a whole: the point is clear that the brothers bear responsibility for Joseph's fate.

A legal custom of the time sets the backdrop for the episode in which the brothers dip Joseph's robe in goat's blood. By this custom, a shepherd was not responsible for a sheep that was lost for reasons beyond the shepherd's control (rather like the "acts of God" for which an insurance company refuses to accept responsibility). In determining whether or not responsibility attaches to a person, the judge or the head of the

clan is supposed to look at the evidence and pass judgment. In v. 32, when the brothers send this message to Jacob, ". . . see now whether it is your son's robe or not," the word translated "see" really has a meaning closer to "discern" or "make a judgment." It is a legal expression, asking Jacob as father of the clan to pass judgment. When he says, "It is my son's robe! A wild animal has devoured him," the brothers are legally absolved of guilt. The Jacob who had once used legal means to cheat Esau is now himself misled into a legal deceit. Although the brothers are legally "not guilty," the sin receives judgment from YHWH, just as it was YHWH's favor and not Jacob's deceit which obtained him the blessings of the birthright.

Genesis 39:1-23 Potiphar's Wife

Verses 2-3 express a major theme in the Joseph story: the Lord is with Joseph and causes things to go well for him. This proves true whatever Joseph's circumstances are.

The story of the attempted seduction of Joseph by Potiphar's wife is well known. His reply in verses 8-9 should be noted: to sin by betraying the trust which Potiphar had placed in him would be to sin against YHWH. The nature of the sin is not seen as simply sexual, but as a broken social relationship, a violation of trust. Such a social sin is interpreted as a sin against YHWH.

The extent of the compromising evidence which Potiphar's wife musters against Joseph in her anger at being rebuffed is not understood unless one is aware that the garment that she rips off him was the undergarment normally worn indoors, with nothing under it. Out of doors, a cloak would also be worn. Thus Joseph runs away

naked—probably not outside but into the courtyard around which such houses were built. Further, when Potiphar's wife says to the servants that Joseph came to "insult" her, she uses a word that has a double meaning, "fondle" as well as "mock." Even in prison, Joseph receives YHWH's chesed, the word we saw earlier in the Abraham story (Gen. 24:14), which means "loyalty, trust, truthfulness to one's own nature, love without sentimental connotations, concern"—and which is usually translated "steadfast love." YHWH's steadfast love does not keep Joseph from danger or distress, but it does protect him in the midst of such situations.

Genesis 40 The Interpretation of Dreams in Prison

An important distinction is made here between the powers that Joseph uses in interpreting the dreams of his fellow-prisoners and the powers that magicians and seers claim. Joseph speaks what God gives him to speak at the moment (v. 8); the power is not his own—it does not reside in him as a gift or ability. Magicians claim to possess powers by which they can manipulate circumstances according to their will. This is an important distinction. Much so-called religious activity has been an attempt to gain some degree of control over the "powers that be." In both the Old and New Testaments such an interpretation or practice of religion is denied. A person such as Joseph or Moses may have great powers, but they are never seen as belonging to that person and can never be used for his or her own purposes. God gives such powers for God's purposes and can take them away at any time. In Acts 8:9-24, a certain Simon the Magician tries to buy from Peter the power to bestow the Holy Spirit. Peter's response is "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God's gift with money!" (v. 20). (From this attempt of Simon's, the practice of buying a position in the church hierarchy has been called "simony.")

Genesis 41 Interpreting Pharaoh's Dreams

Two years after Pharaoh's butler, whose dream Joseph had correctly interpreted, is released from jail, Pharaoh has two dreams which the Egyptian magicians and sages cannot interpret. The butler then

remembers Joseph, and Pharaoh sends for him. Once again Joseph denies that he has any power: “It is not I; God will give Pharaoh a favorable (that is, correct) answer” (v. 16). Joseph’s interpretation of the dreams as a prediction of seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine is accompanied by a practical proposal for preparation for the famine years. Pharaoh is so impressed by this that he appoints Joseph his deputy, the one who will, for all practical purposes, govern Egypt in Pharaoh’s name. (Cf. Daniel 2, in which Daniel also acts as a kind of model of court “wisdom.”)

Only with regard to the throne is Pharaoh higher than Joseph (v. 40). The occupant of the throne was regarded not only as king, but as an incarnation of a god. This should be remembered when we study Moses’ confrontation with Pharaoh in the Book of Exodus; the contest will be between YHWH and the ruling god of Egypt.

Pharaoh gives Joseph the emblems of his office: a signet ring (the official seal), fine linen clothes, and a gold neck chain. He is given a chariot which carries him directly behind the pharaoh’s chariot. The shout which is translated “Bow the knee!” (v. 43) is difficult to interpret. It is shouted by a guard who runs ahead of the chariot. It may be a title, or it may simply mean “look out.” At any rate, it is a sign of the high rank of the one who is coming in the chariot.

Note that Joseph is taken fully into the Egyptian court. He receives an Egyptian name, meaning “God speaks —he lives” or “creator of life,” and he is given the daughter of the priest of the city of On as a wife (v. 45). He has two sons by her, Manasseh and Ephraim. These become the names of two tribes of the later Israelite nation, the socalled “Joseph tribes.” There was never a tribe called Joseph, but these two “Joseph tribes” filled out the number of twelve after the tribe of Levi became priests scattered throughout the others. Certainly the author is aware of the meaning here: that there is Egyptian blood in Israel. Notice that Manasseh is the firstborn and therefore would be expected to rank higher than Ephraim, but we see that once again the younger is given rank above the elder.

The chapter ends with the food distribution plan being put into operation. The grain is sold to the people first for money (v. 56). Later the people are forced to give their flocks and eventually their land and persons in exchange for it. Verse 57, by noting that the famine involved all the earth, links the account of Joseph’s rise to power in Egypt and the coming of his brothers to buy grain.

Genesis 42 Joseph's brothers come to Egypt the first time.

Jacob hears of the availability of grain in Egypt and sends all his sons except Benjamin there. Remember that both Joseph and Benjamin are sons by Rachel, the woman Jacob loved. His grief over Joseph and his unwillingness to subject Benjamin to danger suggest that Rachel’s children are Jacob’s favorites, presumably because of his special love for her.

When the brothers come before Joseph, whom they do not recognize, they fulfill the dream he had described to them: they bow to the ground before him (v. 6). The series of apparently cruel things he does to them in this chapter and the next two may be intended to test the brothers to see if they have changed from the time when they sold him into slavery, but the possibility of revenge must not be omitted. For example, Joseph’s suspicion that they may be spies sent in to discover the weakness of Egypt (v. 9, 11) would be believable—Canaan, whence they had come, was the route along which many invasions of Egypt had come—if it were not for the fact that “all the earth” was coming to Egypt at that time. When Joseph commands that they send their youngest brother as proof of their innocence and then keeps Simeon as hostage, he is imprisoning the most aggressive of his brothers: according to one midrash, a rabbinic commentary on the scriptures, it was Simeon who suggested that Joseph be killed (37:18-20). He is also subjecting his father to the severest test, giving up the remaining son of his beloved Rachel. But, thinking that Joseph could not understand them, for

an Egyptian interpreter is being used in this conversation, the brothers confess their guilt over Joseph as the cause of the distress in which they now find themselves. Their admission of guilt touches Joseph so deeply that he weeps (v. 24). Love begins to replace revenge in Joseph's heart. Part of the test has been passed. As Joseph sends the nine brothers home with grain, he orders that their money be replaced inside the grain sacks. When they discover this, they are struck with great fear (v. 28) and ask what God might now be doing to them. Even though they have long since established their legal innocence regarding Joseph, the brothers continue to feel the judgment of God upon them.

On arriving home they tell Jacob what has happened—and again discover that the money is in their grain sacks (obviously a doublet from another tradition). Jacob refuses to allow Benjamin to go back with them, however, even though Simeon is being held hostage and Reuben offers his own two sons as a guarantee that he will bring Benjamin home safely: "My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he only is left" (v. 38); only Benjamin remains of the sons of Rachel.

Genesis 43:1-45:15 Joseph's Brothers Come to Egypt the Second Time

Simeon's plight has apparently been forgotten; not until the grain is all gone and the famine forces them to apply again to Egypt is the subject of another trip brought up. This is probably not simple indifference toward Simeon; notice that in this chapter Jacob is called Israel, indicating that this may be from a different tradition in which, perhaps, there was no mention of Simeon's being held hostage. It may be that this also explains the brothers' insistence that they had only told about the existence of Benjamin in reply to a direct question from Joseph (43:7), while in 42:13 they volunteered the information themselves, though perhaps they are lying to their father to avoid his anger. Here, too, Judah offers his own life as surety for Benjamin's safety. This particularly has led scholars to assign this section to J, while the Reuben tradition (cf. 42:37) has been generally considered E. Nevertheless, the final text has been prepared to have maximum impact on the reader.

Finally Israel must consent. He has them take presents for "the man," a customary thing to do as well as advisable, in order to curry favor with a potentially dangerous person. They also take double the money, so that they can return the money that was in their sacks from the last trip and pay for the new grain.

In a gesture similar to the killing of the fatted calf in the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32, Joseph orders a feast and tells his steward to bring his brothers into his house. They are frightened at being brought inside the house—such a thing was not done between Egyptian noblemen and crude Bedouins—and they think it must be a trap because they are suspected of having stolen their money back. They quickly tell the steward about the money and offer it back to him. He replies, "Rest assured, do not be afraid; your God and the God of your father must have put treasure in your sacks for you; I received your money" (43:23). Many commentators see this statement, with its reference to God—quite unusual for this story, which is so completely "secular" in contrast to the sagas of Abraham and Jacob—as an indirect reference to the main point of the Joseph story: that God is doing good things for the brothers in spite of their evil intent.

The meeting between Joseph and Benjamin is described in a way that shows the deep love that Joseph feels for his younger brother. Nowhere is his humanity more clear than when he goes apart into his private chamber to weep. The feast scene, where Benjamin receives much more food than the others, is one of celebration, although the brothers have no way of telling what is the cause of the festive occasion. One would expect the revelation of Joseph's true identity to occur in this setting, but Joseph makes one other test to see whether or not his brothers have really changed. He has his own silver cup hidden in Benjamin's sack of grain and sends them off on

their return journey to Canaan. The cup seems to be one which was used in telling the future: patterns were discerned in the residue at the bottom of the cup, rather like reading tea leaves. Joseph's steward catches up with the caravan, accuses the brothers of theft, and finds the cup in Benjamin's sack. All are returned to Joseph, who stands before them as accuser.

It is Judah's speech, in which he recounts in detail the circumstances under which they have brought Benjamin to Egypt, which marks the successful passing of the final test. Judah speaks of his father's great love for the sons of his wife Rachel; of the loss of the elder of these sons, as he thought, by wild beasts, and his fear of losing the younger son as well; of Judah's offer to stand surety for the safety of the boy. Finally, Judah requests of Joseph that he, Judah, be kept as a slave in place of his brother Benjamin so that such great grief may not come to their father. Here Judah not only marks himself as a man of exceptional character, he also reveals a love of family that has replaced hatred among brothers. This concern prepares Joseph for his own disclosure.

Joseph dismisses his attendants and in a tearful scene reveals himself to his brothers. "So dismayed were they at his presence" (45:3), they could not answer. Understandably, they were fearful of his revenge. But Joseph calms their fears or attempts to do so—for we shall see that even after this they are still not certain of his attitude toward them—by stating the central theme of the story: "And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. . . . God sent me before you 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. . ." (45:5-8). The history of Joseph and his brothers is linked with divine purpose. God has not forgotten the promise to Abraham and his seed; they will survive.

Genesis 45:16-47:13 Jacob and His Sons Come to Egypt

The brothers are instructed to return, to tell their father about Joseph, and to bring him back to Egypt. The pharaoh gives them provisions and even wagons to carry their wives and children on the return trip. When Jacob hears that Joseph is alive, he decides to go with them back to Egypt. In chapter 46, we are given a second reason for his decision: God appears to him in a dream, or a "vision of the night," and commands him to go, promising that he will be made a great nation there. "I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again; and Joseph's own hand shall close your eyes" (46:4). (Again, it is difficult to tease out J and E sources here.) The promise by God that he will go down to Egypt with Jacob and will also bring him up again can be interpreted in two ways: Jacob will be brought back to Canaan for his burial, or Israel will later be delivered from the Egyptian bondage under Moses. Possibly both meanings are intended.

Although the biblical writers obviously believe that God wills Jacob's descent into Egypt, it has been pointed out that "the Rabbis pictured Jacob pondering whether to remain in Canaan or settle in Egypt. Had God not expressly forbidden Isaac to go there? Had Abraham not encountered grave dangers in Egypt? Should he, Jacob, be the one to forsake the Promised Land? The Midrash says that he finally decided to leave because the decision was God's and not his" (Plaut, p. 291). For the bib-

lical writers this is a matter of God's working out his plan, already announced to Abraham. It is in Canaan, not in Egypt, that the people of Israel are to fulfill their destiny. The central theme of the Joseph story—that God is working in the history of his people—is not only manifest in the present. It is carried forward into a history of repeated exile and exodus.

The P writer's account begins at 46:6 and goes through verse 27. The usual concern for genealogy is in this

case joined with the need to show that the number of persons who came into Egypt was seventy (46:27). This was a firm tradition by the time of the P writer and is referred to in Deut. 10:22. The list intrudes upon the story, in both style and content, for it lists ten sons for Benjamin, who is depicted as only a boy at this stage of the story.

Even with Joseph's exalted position in Egypt, he sponsors a bit of trickery to allow the clan to settle in Goshen, a tract of land on the eastern edge of Egypt. If the pharaoh is told that Jacob's family are shepherds, he will allow them to settle in Goshen, safely away from the cities of Egypt, "for all shepherds are abhorrent to the Egyptians" (46:34). The pharaoh allows them to settle in Goshen and also puts his cattle under their care. In 47:11, the land is called "the land of Rameses," which could not have been its name at the time of the story, for this is the name of a later pharaoh; Rameses II is probably the name of the pharaoh in Exodus 1:8 "who did not know Joseph" under whom the cities of Pithom and Ramses were built. (This is a variant spelling of the same name.) This is another case of "reading back" into an earlier time, and it also serves to locate the Israelites in the area in which we are to find them at the beginning of Exodus.

Genesis 47:13-26 Joseph Acquires the Land for Pharaoh

When the Egyptians have spent all their money for grain and the famine continues, Joseph demands that they give over their cattle to the pharaoh in exchange for food. When the cattle are used up, Joseph takes their land and then themselves as slaves for the pharaoh. "Only the land of the priests he did not buy; for the priests had a fixed allowance from Pharaoh, and lived on the allowance that Pharaoh gave them" (47:22). Beyond this, Joseph requires that a fifth of the crops which the people raise from the seed given to them should come to the pharaoh.

The state of affairs depicted here is in fact the situation that prevailed in Egypt at the time this story was being edited into its present form. Some commentators see nothing in this story beyond Joseph's claiming credit for a very shrewd and practical way of dealing with a complex food shortage. Certainly it is true that the story as it stands suggests no condemnation of Joseph for reducing the people of the land to slavery, including, as it turns out, the people of Israel.

Nonetheless, is there not a pattern in this? Jacob had tried to gain his birthright, his blessing, and his prosperity by deceit, and in his turn had been deceived concerning his desired wife, Rachel, and concerning the guilt for the apparent loss of his son Joseph. Again, although the brothers were legally acquitted by Jacob's saying that a wild beast had killed Joseph, still they felt the judgment of God upon their evil act, as 42:21 shows: "Alas we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother; . . . that is why this anguish has come upon us."

When this story was told, the concept of a justice higher than human justice had already fully developed. The brothers' guilt must bear its result: as Joseph was sold into bondage, so the nation of Israel must go into bondage. For the ancient Hebrew, slavery was somewhat akin to death and could not go unatoned. The sons of Israel sold Joseph into slavery; therefore, it might well be argued that the later bondage of the people of Israel might be seen as retribution for the selling of Joseph.

Furthermore, what is the Hebrew conscience to make of Joseph's policy of taking the land and enslaving the people for the pharaoh? Could it not be argued that the enslavement of the Israelites is fair recompense for Joseph's policy which enslaved the Egyptians? The story nowhere makes either of these points explicitly. The obvious point of the story, which is stated in several places, is that through Joseph God has saved God's people from starvation in the famine in order that God's purposes for them might be fulfilled. Joseph, then, becomes the hero of the piece, and no negative judgment is brought against him. In the sober reflection of hindsight, however, it might seem that a pattern of justice can be traced and that the account of the seizure of

the land and of the people is important to that pattern.

Genesis 47:27-49:27 The Blessings of Jacob

All three of the sources give a version of the end of Jacob's life: In 47:27-28 and in 48:3-7, the P source sums up the end by stating the length of time of Jacob's sojourn in Egypt and of his life. He then has Jacob claim Ephraim and Manasseh as his children, thus accounting for those tribes in the later settlement of the land. The J source is the main body of the account, but E's announcement to Joseph of Jacob's illness is inserted (48:1-2a) into the J story. In that version Joseph is already with his father and has vowed to him that he would see to it that Jacob be buried with his forebears.

In 48:8, Israel (the name J characteristically uses for Jacob) sees Joseph's sons for the first time and calls for them so that he might give them his blessing. The rite of adoption may be involved in this blessing, according to the P version (v. 48:5), for 48:12 says that "Then Joseph removed them from his father's knees, and he bowed himself with his face to the earth." To take a child "upon the knees" was a sign of adoption, and Joseph's response of great gratitude would be appropriate.

Then there follows a repetition of the motif, which we have seen earlier in the case of Jacob and Esau, in which the younger receives the blessing expected to go to the older. In this case, however, although Jacob is blind as was his father, Isaac, there is no deception. Joseph assumes that Jacob has made a mistake when he puts his right hand upon Ephraim's head, but Jacob's crossing of his hands has been intentional. In this way, the later preeminence of Ephraim is accounted for. (The blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh occurs twice, the E version being inserted into the J account in verses 15-16, and the J version coming in verse 20.)

Almost all of chapter 49 is taken up with the blessings of Jacob, or the "prophecies" of Jacob. We need look at only a few of them. In general they describe the status of the tribes at the time of King David. Verses 3-4 refer to the story fragment in 35:22, in which Reuben is said to have lain with his father's concubine, Bilhah. Reflected here is the fact that at the time this poem was composed, the tribe of Reuben was

weak. Simeon and Levi are condemned to be scattered throughout Israel because of their violence in the story of the rape of Dinah (Gen. 34). This agrees with the later fact that Simeon had shrunk to the status of a mere city within Judah, and Levi was no longer a tribe but a priestly group spread throughout the tribes. The sayings about Judah in verses 8-12 have sometimes been taken as messianic—that is, predicting the coming of the Messiah from the tribe of Judah. This, in fact, came to be an expectation, but in these verses probably means simply that Judah is to prosper greatly, as it did under the reign of David. The references to the lesser tribes were no doubt clear to people at that time, but are not fully understandable to us now. The verses which refer to Joseph, 22-26, show him as the favorite and the hero of this story. To him come the most abundant blessings. The reference to Benjamin as a plunderer (v. 27) is strange in the context of this story in which he is so beloved. But there are other indications in the Bible that Benjamin may have been a tribe from the desert in the south of Palestine with whom relations were not always amicable.

Genesis 49:28-50:26 The Death of Jacob and Joseph

When Jacob dies, he is taken by his sons, with the pharaoh's permission, to the ancestral burial place of Machpelah. With the death of their father, the brothers again fear that Joseph might take his revenge on them. Once again (50:19-20) Joseph states the theme of the book: "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." Does this mean that God meant the brothers to sell Joseph? This particular strand of theology is still in the world: that everything that happens is because God caused it. Another view, and one more nearly in the heart of Christianity, is that while God can and does bring good from bad, God

does not cause the bad in order to bring good from it. The Lord who can cause good to stem from evil can surely also bring good from other good!

At the point of his own death, Joseph promises his brothers that God will bring them out of Egypt into the land that he has promised to the patriarchs. Joseph dies and is buried in Egypt.

The story of Joseph sets the stage for the bondage in Egypt and the Exodus. The terms necessary for the revelation of God in the Exodus are stated in this story. The great love which God has for Israel, like the love which Jacob had for Joseph, can create envy in the eyes of others and cause injustice to be done to the Israelites as it was to Joseph; yet it is this love which leads also to the final triumph of Joseph and of Israel. Certainly it is in the story of Joseph that the idea of God as redeemer is brought to full expression: the idea of God as the intimate relative of the nation, the ultimate ruler who is responsible for the people because of God's covenant with them and who forgives offenses just as Joseph forgave his brothers. This God acts in all of history and in all lands, and the evil which men and women do God uses to fulfill his ultimate purposes. The evil that the brothers do to Joseph proves the crucible of their testing. And they come through the test to a new sense of themselves and their clan. They also come through famine to salvation. Israel, too, will undergo deep suf-

fering, yet it will be in that suffering that Israel becomes what God in love destines her to be. Finally, in the story of Joseph the promise and the loving overlordship of the all-powerful God is affirmed in such terms as to be forever a source of hope for Israel, even in her worst times.

end of chapter

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World eventsback

We could discuss this.

>

God bringing good out of evil - personal storiesback

There was the time that I sold my Freddie Mac stock after the company forced me to retire. From my perspective I did it simply because I was mad at them, not through any financial acumen or inside knowledge. Sheer dumb luck, as it turned out. Where was God for me in this? And where was God for all my friends and former co-workers who rode the stock all the way down to zero?

>

Levirate marriageback

A form existed (exists?) in many cultures. A combination of Social Security and preservation of the family.

>

Sheol[back]

More on Sheol from Wikipedia and the Jewish Encyclopedia.

>

Relativesback

And the terms for family relationships are more fluid even in modern times than we might realize. For example the person whom Jane Austen calls a "brother in law" we would call a "stepbrother."

>

Herodotus and cult prostitutes[back]

Not quite. Not just one night. Herodotus says that once in her life every woman had to go to the temple and *stay there until someone picked her up*. That could take a while.

>

Cult or regular?back

I don't understand this at all, and would welcome a citation. Surely Tamar was posing as a regular working girl, not a temple prostitute.

>

Memories can disagree[back]

We surely aren't suggesting that the story derives from what the brothers said to a historian?

>

Legally not guiltyback

Unbelievable!

>

Legally not guiltyback

We could discuss how this relates to prayer...

>

"Food distribution" back

This is not the kind of humanitarian act that we think we remember from the Sunday School of our childhood.

>

"Don't be angry with yourselves" back

We're back to the central point about Israel's destiny. It's fate. God did it. Discuss.

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