

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 10

Joseph: the Background Story “Find the Rewind Button!”

Stop what you are doing! Still reading? Then, you did not stop what you were doing! Now, in fairness, I did not really mean for you to stop, for if I did, I could have stopped typing. If you had truly wanted to stop reading, then you could have, but even still you have limitations even on how and when you stop. For example, try to follow this instruction carefully:

Stop reading after the first word in this sentence.

Let me suggest we try this again. Go back in time before you read past the first line in this lesson and this time stop reading. Of course, you cannot do that either. There is no way to go back and relive an earlier moment. You can savor the moment in your memory, but you cannot relive it. Life has no rewind button.

This is a pity to me in many ways. Of course I do not care about the sentences above, but more times than I can count, I wish life had a rewind button. There are mistakes I could fix, good times I could relive, missed opportunities I could seize, needless worries I could dismiss, and occasionally new insights I could bring to bear.

When I read the Joseph story, the rewind button stays front and center in my mind. Surely Joseph’s brothers would have liked a rewind button. I suspect several other characters in the story would have as well.

In studying Joseph, we need to examine the story on several levels. First, the story itself merits serious attention. It is the longest narrative in Genesis and lays the immediate foundation for Moses and the exodus. Rabbis, Christian commentators, painters, even composers of operas have found the material rich for its messages. Reportedly, over 20,000 schools and theater groups have performed Webber and Rice’s musical, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*.

A second level of examination of the story probes the historical questions presented. When did Joseph live? Who was Pharaoh while Joseph worked in Egypt? Is there any external evidence of the Joseph story? If so, what? If not, why not? This second level of examination fuses into the Moses story because the same questions form around Moses, the plagues, and the exodus.

We start our consideration with the story line itself, considering the thoughts and comments brought to bear by both Jewish and Christian commentators throughout

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the ages. Then next week we move to the more difficult questions of time and place.

JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS

Seven years into Jacob's marriages with Leah and Rachel finally brought about the birth of a son by his first and greatest love, Rachel. Ten other sons and at least one daughter had come through Leah and two servants given to Jacob in marriage, Bilhah and Zilpah. Rachel names the son "Joseph," a pun on two Hebrew words. Joseph sounds like the Hebrew for "He has removed" and also like the Hebrew for "May he add." Rachel chooses this name both because God had removed away her shame and in hopes that God may bless her with yet another son.

When Joseph is around six, his family leaves (flees) Mesopotamia and grandfather Laban and returns to Canaan, the Promised Land. Rachel gets pregnant again and dies while giving birth to Jacob's twelfth son, Benjamin.¹ Joseph was well named on both accounts: God took away Rachel's shame, and God added another son afterwards, although at the cost of Rachel's life.

Just as Jacob had favorites among his wives, he had favorites among his children. Jacob "loved Joseph more than any of his other sons" (Gen. 37:3), and it showed. Jacob has a special robe made for Joseph, which he wore, no doubt, to the dismay and hurt of his brothers.

The robe and inordinate affection of his father was one factor of many that contributed to difficult and hurtful alienation between Joseph and his ten older brothers. Without getting into details, Scripture goes to the trouble of telling of an incident where Joseph "tattled" on his brothers, getting them in trouble with their dad over issues that came up while the brothers were all working together.

During his teenage years, Joseph had several dreams about his family that he shared with them, increasing the alienation. In one dream, Joseph and his brothers are binding sheaves (the equivalent of baling hay in their day) when Joseph's sheaf stands upright while the brothers' sheaves bow down to it. Joseph's brothers did not take the dream well, seeing it as a claim by Joseph that he would rule over them. The text tells us,

So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words (Gen. 37:8).

¹ Rachel names the son "Benoni" in her dying breaths, but Jacob changes the name to Benjamin. "Benoni" can mean either "son of my sorrow" or "son of my strength." Jacob is not happy with this and calls him "Benjamin" meaning "son of my right hand."

Rather than improving the situation, Joseph told his brothers and father about his subsequent dream where the sun, moon, and eleven stars bowed down to him. At this, even his father rebuked him, and his brothers' jealousy was stoked hotter.

At some later time, Joseph's brothers were tending the family sheep near Shechem when Joseph was sent to check on things. Shechem was a prosperous town where the town prince had earlier raped Jacob's daughter, Dinah. Jacob owned some property nearby (Gen. 33:19, 34:2).² Not finding the brothers there, Joseph journeyed on to Dothan, another 15 miles north.

Joseph's brothers saw him coming while still fairly far away (perhaps his coat was the giveaway!) and they conspired to kill him.

Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what becomes of him and his dreams (Gen. 37:19-20).

The oldest brother, Reuben, knew the actions were wrong, but did not have the courage to stand up and stop it. He did at least change their mind on killing Joseph *before* throwing him into the pit. Reuben figured if the brothers would throw Joseph into the pit alive, then Reuben could later rescue Joseph.

The brothers adopted Reuben's modified plan and tore Joseph's special robe off him before throwing him into the pit. Having satisfied their jealous envy, the brothers then sat down to satisfy their hunger. While eating, the brothers noticed a trading caravan that had crossed the Jordan River traversing the valley on its way to Egypt with spices from Gilead.

Judah got the bright idea that the brothers could get money for Joseph by selling him into slavery (twenty pieces of silver!³) with the traders rather than simply leaving him to die in the hole. Evidently Reuben was not there for that decision because Reuben returned later to rescue Joseph. When Reuben found out what his brothers had done, he did not go after the caravan to buy Joseph back. Instead he schemed with his brothers to deceive his father. We are not told if Reuben took his share of the twenty pieces of silver.

² Ironic to the story, Shechem is also where Joseph is ultimately buried at the family property (Josh. 24:32).

³ Egyptologist K. A. Kitchen charts the rising price of slaves through the 2,000 years of Biblical history using non-Biblical sources as reference points. The twenty shekels of silver is in line with the prices in the 300-year period from 1850 to 1500 BC. See, Kitchen, K. A., *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, (Eerdmans 2003) at 639.

The brothers made rips in Joseph's robe, dipped it in an animal's blood, and then took it home. Jacob logically concluded that animals had mauled Joseph, hurling Jacob into deep depression and mourning. In some weird way, the guilty sons join with the other children to try and comfort Jacob, but to no avail. The man is hurt in ways only a parent who has lost a child could understand – Jacob is destroyed.

JOSEPH AND POTIPHAR

In Egypt, Potiphar, an officer⁴ of Pharaoh who served as Captain of the guard purchased Joseph from the traders. While working for Potiphar, Joseph quickly made a name for himself, to the credit and glory of God.

The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. His master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD caused all that he did to succeed in his hands, so Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him, and he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had (Gen. 39:2-4).

Because God blessed all that Joseph did, Potiphar continually assigned Joseph more and more responsibility, ultimately making him the comptroller, the overseer of the estate, as well as his personal attendant.⁵

We are told that Joseph was also an attractive young man who caught the fancy of Potiphar's wife. Day after day, the wife attempted to seduce and beguile Joseph into an illicit relationship. Joseph refused knowing the illicit relationship would be wrong. Matters came to a conclusion when the wife tried to physically pull Joseph into a physical bond. Joseph fled, leaving his clothes in the grip of Potiphar's wife.

British playwright William Congreve wrote in *The Mourning Bride* the famous line,

Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned (Act 3, scene 8).⁶

⁴ The titles given Potiphar in Genesis are not easily translated into titles understood today. Potiphar had some kind of superintendant responsibility as a judicial functionary in Pharaoh's court, but precisely what that was is open to debate. See the discussion in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, (Thomson Gale 2007) 2d ed., Vol. 11 at 407.

⁵ Kitchen goes into great detail on the Egyptian evidence for foreigners like Joseph rising high in the ranks of Egyptian households and even Pharaoh's court. See Kitchen at 348ff.

⁶ This same play has the oft-quoted line, "Music has charms to soothe a savage beast." Both of these lines are among those most often wrongly attributed to Shakespeare.

Reading the account of Joseph makes one wonder if this was source material for Congreve! Potiphar's wife did not take the ultimate rejection lying down! She told the men of the household that Joseph had tried to sexually assault her. Once her husband came home, she told him the same story. Potiphar reacted angrily and locked Joseph up in the same prison Pharaoh used for his prisoners.

Before moving on to the narrative about the imprisonment, we need to compare the way Joseph reacted to sinful opportunity to those of his eldest brother Reuben. While Reuben refused to stand up against evil plans, instead modifying them in such a way that he might ultimately be able to live with the outcome, Joseph did stand up. Reuben was left having to lie to his father, and live remorsefully over his sin, while Joseph suffered wrongful imprisonment, but was ultimately blessed by God through the events.

Many scholars also see that Joseph's wrongful imprisonment in Pharaoh's jail foreshadows the imprisonment we will see of all Israel before Pharaoh in the coming chapters. Both will take an act of God for release!

JOSEPH IN PRISON

When Joseph went to prison, he left Potiphar, his job, his home, and his friends, but God never left Joseph. The narrative makes a point to say:

But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison (Gen. 39:21).

It is the same story we saw in Joseph's slavery to Potiphar. In a matter of time, Joseph was in charge of all the other prisoners. Joseph's confinement brought great freedom to the warden!

Whatever was done there, he [Joseph] was the one who did it. The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph's charge, because the LORD was with him. And whatever he did, the LORD made it succeed (Gen. 39:22-23).

Among the inmates were two of Pharaoh's servants, his cupbearer and his baker. While in custody, the two had disturbing dreams. After awaking, both men were troubled likely missing their access to the people normally charged with interpreting dreams.

In Egypt as far back as perhaps the 19th and 20th centuries BC, there were written prognostications and interpretations to be accorded dreams. In a copy dating from Rameses II's era (early thirteenth century BC), there are lists of dream subjects

followed by a label of “good” or “bad” and then followed by the interpretation.⁷ In prison, the cupbearer and baker did not have access to this insight and they were troubled. Joseph explained he needed no such book, for the interpretation of dreams came from God.

The cupbearer went first explaining his dream. He had dreamed of a grape vine that had three branches. The branches fruited and the cupbearer pressed the grapes into Pharaoh’s cup, giving the cup to Pharaoh.

Joseph interpreted: the branches were three days, the length of time that would pass before Pharaoh gave the cupbearer his old job back. Joseph asked the cupbearer to remember Joseph upon his release.

Liking the interpretation, the baker then told Joseph his dream. The baker had dreamed of three baskets loaded with baked goods on his head. Birds were eating the foods. Joseph explained that in three days, Pharaoh would lift the baker’s head up and hang him. The birds would then come feed on the baker’s dead flesh.

Three days passed and the events unfolded exactly as Joseph predicted. The cupbearer was restored to Pharaoh and the baker ceased hanging around. Despite Joseph’s imploring, the cupbearer totally forgot to mention Joseph to Pharaoh, leaving Joseph imprisoned for another two years.

PHARAOH’S DREAMS

Two years passed when Pharaoh had disturbing dreams of his own. Pharaoh’s wise men and court practitioners of the arts were not able (or at least claimed not to be able⁸) to interpret the dreams. The dreams continued to trouble Pharaoh and finally the cupbearer recalled his dream experiences with Joseph. The cupbearer recounted those events to Pharaoh, and Pharaoh immediately sent for Joseph.

Joseph readied himself (cleaned up, shaved⁹, put on non-prison garb) and came before Pharaoh. At their initial meeting, Joseph starts out emphasizing that God

⁷ See the Papyrus Chester Beatty III published by A. H. Gardiner, *Hieratic Papyri in the British Museum I-II* (British Museum 1935), 7-23 and plates 5-8a, 12-12a. See comments and explanations in Kitchen at 350f.

⁸ Some scholars note that the sages might have feared Pharaoh’s reaction if they told him the bad news in the dreams. Joseph has no such concerns and gives the news, good and bad, along with a wise solution for dealing with the bad aspects.

⁹ The Story of Sinuhe (c.1960 BC), referenced in an earlier lesson, discusses the life of an Egyptian who lived among the Canaanites. Upon his return to Egypt, Sinuhe recounted his preparations, very similar in this respect to Joseph’s:

I left the audience-hall, the royal daughters giving me their hands. We went through the great portals, and I was put in the house of a prince. In

gets all credit for proper interpretation of dreams. Pharaoh then launched into the dreams. In one, seven plump cows came out of the Nile and ate the reed grass. Seven thin and ugly cows then came and ate the seven plump cows. Even after eating the good cows, the thin ones stayed gaunt.

The second dream followed the first and it was similar but with ears of corn. Seven good ears grew on a stalk followed by seven bad ears on another. The bad ears then ate the good ears.

Joseph then told Pharaoh the dreams' interpretations.

The dreams of Pharaoh are one; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do (Gen. 41:25).

Joseph explained that seven years of plentiful production and harvest were coming to Egypt followed by seven years of famine. Joseph then went a step further and offered Pharaoh some unsolicited advice. Joseph recommended setting a man over a group of overseers that would collect twenty percent of the land's produce during the bountiful years for storage and disbursement during the famine.

Pharaoh saw God's wisdom in Joseph and appointed Joseph to the task. At this point, Joseph was 30 years old, and had spent almost half his life (13 years) in Egypt. He assumed the awesome responsibility Pharaoh assigned and excelled in it, just like he had most everything else. During the seven prosperous years, Joseph married an Egyptian and fathered two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim.

The dreams came true precisely as Joseph had predicted, and Egypt was ready for the fierce famine. The famine reached not only the borders of Egypt, but beyond. Many people outside Egypt came to Pharaoh seeking food, setting up a family reunion of sorts.

RECONCILIATION

it were luxuries: a bathroom and mirrors. In it were riches from the treasury; clothes of royal linen, myrrh, and the choice perfume of the king and of his favorite courtiers were in every room. Every servant was at his task. Years were removed from my body. I was shaved; my hair was combed. Thus was my squalor returned to the foreign land, my dress to the Sand-farers. I was clothed in fine linen; I was anointed with fine oil. I slept on a bed. I had returned the sand to those who dwell in it, the tree-oil to those who grease themselves with it.

Among those affected by the famine were Joseph's father and siblings back in Canaan. Over twenty years had gone by and doubtless many things had changed, but one thing remained constant—Jacob's inordinate love for children of Rachel. Since the apparent death of Joseph, Jacob had become extra protective over the youngest child, Benjamin.

Jacob learned of the food available in Egypt and sent all the brothers, save Benjamin, to buy grain. As governor over the land, Joseph was in charge of selling the food. He recognized his ten brothers as they bowed before him, but the brothers did not see the nearly forty-year-old Egyptian official as their long lost brother whom they had last seen as a teenager.

The dialogue between the brothers is interesting as Joseph spoke roughly and challenged their professed identity. It was hard on the brothers and they saw the difficulties as punishment for their sins against Joseph from twenty years earlier. The guilt from their crime continued to plague them decades later. They spoke of this in their native tongue, not realizing Joseph could understand them (Joseph had been using a translator to aid in concealing his identity). This moved Joseph to tears, and he left the room.

Ultimately, Joseph sold them the food but insisted they return with their youngest brother to prove their identity and validate their story. Unknown to the brothers, Joseph also had the Egyptian staff put their money back into their sacks along with the grain. Joseph held one brother, Simeon, and sent the others back. Once they arrived home and gave Jacob the news, he got quite upset. He was not over the loss of Joseph some 20 years earlier, bringing it up along with the new loss of Simeon, and the potential for losing Benjamin.

While Jacob initially refused to let Benjamin return with the brothers to reclaim Simeon, the famine was so severe that the brothers ultimately had to return to Egypt for more food. Knowing they had no chance without their youngest brother, they finally got Jacob to relent and allow him to go. The brothers went back taking not only the new money to buy grain, but also the original money that was mysteriously in their baggage upon their initial return to Canaan.

Once the brothers reached Joseph in Egypt, they were ushered in for a dinner. Joseph continued to ply the role of Egyptian governor as he quizzed his brothers about their family. In this way, he discreetly learned of his father's health. Recognizing Benjamin for who he was, Joseph had to leave the room because he could not stop from crying.

Joseph then put his brothers to a test. He sent them their grain and again had their money replaced in the sacks. This time, however, he had his own silver cup put in the bag of Benjamin. The brothers were on the road out of town when Joseph's

guards caught up and asserted that they repaid Joseph's hospitality by stealing Joseph's cup. The brothers rashly proclaimed,

Whichever of your servants is found with it shall die, and we will also be my lord's servants (Gen. 44:9).

The search is dramatic, for it starts with the oldest and works down. The cup is not found in the first, second, third, or fourth bag. It is not until the eleventh and final bag is opened, that of Benjamin, that the cup is discovered.

Once the brothers realized the situation, they went into full panic mode. They offered to all enter into slavery, but Joseph refused, claiming only the right to Benjamin. At this point Judah stepped forward and gave a decently honest rendition of why this action would destroy their father. The speech is long, but each word stings and is worth note:

Then Judah went up to him and said, "Oh, my lord, please let your servant speak a word in my lord's ears, and let not your anger burn against your servant, for you are like Pharaoh himself. My lord asked his servants, saying, 'Have you a father, or a brother?' And we said to my lord, 'We have a father, an old man, and a young brother, the child of his old age. His brother is dead, and he alone is left of his mother's children, and his father loves him.' Then you said to your servants, 'Bring him down to me, that I may set my eyes on him.' We said to my lord, 'The boy cannot leave his father, for if he should leave his father, his father would die.' Then you said to your servants, 'Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you shall not see my face again.'

"When we went back to your servant my father, we told him the words of my lord. And when our father said, 'Go again, buy us a little food,' we said, 'We cannot go down. If our youngest brother goes with us, then we will go down. For we cannot see the man's face unless our youngest brother is with us.' Then your servant my father said to us, 'You know that my wife bore me two sons. One left me, and I said, Surely he has been torn to pieces, and I have never seen him since. If you take this one also from me, and harm happens to him, you will bring down my gray hairs in evil to Sheol.'

"Now therefore, as soon as I come to your servant my father, and the boy is not with us, then, as his life is bound up in the boy's life, as soon as he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die, and your servants will bring down the gray hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol. For your servant became a pledge of safety

for the boy to my father, saying, 'If I do not bring him back to you, then I shall bear the blame before my father all my life.' Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the boy as a servant to my lord, and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the evil that would find my father." (Gen. 44:18-34)

Joseph could handle this no longer. He sent all the Egyptians out, including the interpreter he had been using. Then, Joseph revealed his true identity to his brothers. I doubt anyone could record how stunned the brothers were as they realized what was going on. Twenty years earlier, they had sold their dreaming brother into slavery and now found themselves dependant upon him for their lives and the lives of their families. What is more, Joseph did not hold their sins against them, instead seeing that what they had meant for harm, God used to protect the whole family.

Pharaoh heard of Joseph's brothers' presence and sent wagons and men to bring Joseph's family into the best parts of Egypt for their living.

MIGRATION

Joseph stayed in Egypt working while his brothers returned to Jacob with the wagons, the gifts, and the food. When Jacob first heard the news, it seemed too good to be true. At first, he did not believe them, but he was ultimately persuaded that they were telling the truth. Jacob then had his spirit "revived" and declared,

It is enough; Joseph my son is still alive. I will go and see him before I die (Gen. 45:28).

Jacob decided to travel to Egypt and before he left, God came to him in a night vision and assured him the descent to Egypt was the right thing to do. God assured Jacob he would still fulfill his promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, making of Jacob a great nation and giving his offspring Canaan.

God assured Jacob,

I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again, and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes (Gen. 46:4).

So seventy people from the house of Jacob descended into Egypt with the promise of return at the right time.¹⁰

¹⁰ The Septuagint reads 75 people rather than 70. The difference is reckoned on whether to count Jacob and Joseph, and also how to count the other children of Joseph. See Hamilton, Victor, The

Jacob arrived in Goshen, the area in Egypt where his family would ultimately settle. Joseph mounted his chariot and drove to find his father, collapsing in tears while hugging him. Jacob proclaimed,

Now let me die, since I have seen your face and know that you are still alive (Gen. 47:30).

Joseph then brought Jacob into the presence of Pharaoh and the two conversed. Jacob blessed Pharaoh before leaving. For the last seventeen years of his life, Jacob lived in Egypt with all of his offspring.

Once Jacob died, Joseph mourned him ordering the Egyptian embalmers to do their best work. With Pharaoh's permission, Joseph took Jacob's body back to the cave at Machpelah where Abraham and Isaac were buried. Jacob was added to the family tomb.

Joseph returned to Egypt where his brothers feared for their lives. Still living with the guilt and memory of what they had done to Joseph now almost forty years earlier, they bowed to him again seeking his forgiveness. Joseph explained his understanding that God was at work, even in the midst of their sin. Here Genesis ends with the Israelites in Egypt, setting the stage for the coming Exodus.

POINTS FOR HOME

Rabbis of old drive home great lessons from the Joseph stories (Many of these same lessons were adopted and set out by later Christian commentators as well.) They used this story to teach the importance of steadfastness in the face of temptation (compare Joseph with Potiphar's wife to Reuben with his brothers). The sibling love that Joseph had for his family is held as an example for others. The effort that Joseph put into his work along with the modesty of his character are used as examples for conduct in the marketplace and public office. The rabbis also find negative points to reinforce like the problems that arise from favoritism by a parent. We note the rabbinical teaching but then choose a few different points for home.

1. *"You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good"* (Gen. 50:19).

Surely, this is an amazing story of the working hand of God. Yet, as we read the story something is conspicuously missing! At no point in time do we see God working any miracle in the life of Joseph, at least if by miracle we mean a supernatural event with no discernable natural cause. Joseph

Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50, (Eerdmans 1995) at 598. Stephen uses the Septuagint number in his defense speech in Acts 7.

does interpret dreams noting that interpretations come from God, but we are not told that God gave him the interpretations in some miraculous way. God does not speak to Joseph as he did Jacob. No angels are wrestling in the night. This is a story of God working in and through situations, people, circumstances, even sin, in order to bring about his will.

How often do we feel removed from Bible stories because we fail to see the miraculous in our lives? Yet, the hand of God could not have been more involved or more evident than we have in this story of God's providential care. We need to see God at work in the details of our daily lives, and give him credit for doing so.

2. *"The LORD was with him. And whatever he did, the LORD made it succeed."* (Gen. 39:23).

God's blessing on Joseph was constant, even in the face of disasters. Sold in slavery, he rose in Potiphar's house. Wrongly accused, he rose in the prison. God blessed everything Joseph did. This brings up a wonderful prayer for our children and loved ones: "Lord, please make them a Joseph. Give each of them the integrity and steadfastness he devotedly possessed. Bless what they put their hands to in ways that bring glory to your name!"

3. *"It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him"* (Gen. 50:15).

How many people in this saga wanted a rewind button? Certainly, the brothers did. For their lifetime they were plagued by the guilt of their actions. So also Jacob—I am sure he thought many times about whether he should have sent a seventeen-year-old on that journey which led to his separation in Egypt.

Yet there was no rewind button then, just as there isn't now. We live and we make choices. Each day our life passes, and with it pass opportunities that are never repeated. These are opportunities to do right and opportunities to do wrong. Each day we awaken and the past is over. We need to stay cognizant of this and appreciate what we have.

WANT MORE?

Take a personal inventory. Where are you living in wishes for a rewind button? How can that help you adjust to focus and make good choices today?

For next week, research a bit -- rummage around. Can you figure out who was Joseph's Pharaoh?