



GOD'S INVISIBLE HAND

Sibling Rivalry and the Family's Future (Genesis 37-50)

Does God guide our lives? Is the hand of heaven providing for peoples and moving history? Way back in Genesis 1—2, we reflected on the splendid paradox of a God who is both transcendent (above and powerful over all creation) and immanent (intimately involved with and in creation). The technical word for God's care for and within history is "Providence", which comes from the Latin word "pro", which means "before", and "vide" which means to see. The theology of providence explores how God "sees to" the things that happen in the cosmos or provides for creation.

The question matters to us, doesn't it? It matters when the sun rises every morning and it matters when we reflect at a 50 year wedding anniversary when we reflect on the strange "coincidences" that led to the couple meeting in the first place. It enters the realm of mystery when we ask how hurricanes happen and good people get cancer. Providence is important to us as a part of our picture of and relationship with the God Genesis has been revealing to us, and now it's time for the story of Joseph and his brothers to focus our attention on the way God's power and involvement happen and matter in lived lives. So let's read on!

Dysfunction Junction

The Bible sometimes gives wise counsel about how to raise a family well. But any author who wishes to write a book on how to raise a family would hardly turn to Genesis. Terrible tales of family system breakdown feature here there and everywhere in our story.

- We had barely left the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve's sons had a big-boy squabble and Cain tragically killed his brother Abel. (Genesis 4) Then, in scenes we did not read together along our way,
- Noah's kids surely had to seek loads of therapy to deal with the time their dad got lousy drunk and lay blissfully, shamelessly, embarrassingly naked before them. (Genesis 9)
- Abraham and Sarah thought they needed to help God keep the promise of offspring, so they arranged for Sarah's servant, Hagar, to sleep with Abraham and Ishmael was born. All sorts of jealousy ensued, so Abraham threw mother Hagar and son Ishmael out into the wilderness. (Genesis 16)
- When powerful Egyptian men ogled Sarah and (years later) Rebekah, rather than

defending their honor, Abraham and then Isaac chose to save their own skin and let the men have their way. (Genesis 20 and 26).

- Last Jacob tricked his brother Esau to steal both the blessing and the inheritance that properly belonged to the elder son.
- Our reading begins with the story of how the jealous brothers of Joseph plan to murder him, but then learn that they can profit a bit by selling him to slave traders who are passing through (Genesis 37).
- And one chapter later, one of those sons, Judah, forgets his daughter-in-law Tamar's proper claim to a husband from the clan, so to hold Judah accountable she tricks him into sleeping with her. (Genesis 38)

This families of Genesis most assuredly put the fun in dysfunction. And yet, remarkably, all of that bad acting and mistreatment cannot seem to derail God's promise and providence that continue to move history forward through Abraham and Sarah's clan. The story of Joseph's brothers' treachery amplifies this truth for us.

What events in your life have seemed terrible or unwelcome, but somehow fit into a larger picture of God's provision?

A Torn Technicolor Dream Coat

The fathers of Genesis have favorite kids. Noah woke from his drunken stupor and (quite arbitrarily, as it seems) cursed his son Ham (and his Canaan) and blessed his son Shem. Abraham tossed Ishmael out and loved Isaac. Isaac favored Ishmael, the man's boy. And Jacob just loved his young prodigy, Joseph. As we read, this pattern rings familiar. Because, as much as parents hope to and pretend to love all their kids the same, parents are also human and have secret favorites.

"Now Israel (a.k.a. Jacob) loved Joseph more than any other of his children," our narrator tells us, "because he was the son of his old age," and that favor made for a favorite gift: "[Jacob] had made him a long robe with sleeves." (37.3)



Being favorite can be fun, but in this story, it doesn't work out so well for Joseph at first. Because of that favor he becomes a cocky, annoying twerp, whom his eleven (count them, ELEVEN) older and bigger and stronger brothers resent. They have their reasons.

- After a day helping watch the sheep, Joseph tattles on his brothers to Daddy. (37.2)
- He flaunts that stylish jacket to them every chance he gets. (37.3)
- At the breakfast table, he shares freely with them his dreams, which place him preeminent among the sibs. (37.5-11)

As our narrator understates it, "when his brothers saw that their father loved [Joseph] more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him." (Genesis 37.4)

Joseph's arrogance, along with his brother's envy, almost costs Joseph his life. One day, his dad sends him out to help his brothers watch the sheep. Thought the brothers have gone to a distant field (Jacob's estate has become massive by now!), Joseph eventually tracks them down. But...

They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. ¹⁹They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. ²⁰Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams." (37.18-20)

Brother Reuben is the only one with a soft spot in his heart for Joseph, and he succeeds (barely) at persuading the lot to refrain from killing him. Instead, they decide to toss him in a pit, so they rip the blasted coat off him and toss him down there. Reuben has a plan: he'll circle back and rescue Joseph later, when tempers have cooled.

But if Reuben is the compassionate one, Judah is the capitalist with a bit of a conscience. While Reuben is out grabbing a quick smoke, a band of slave traders roll through, and Judah does some quick calculating.

“What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? ²⁷ Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” (37.26-27)

The brothers agree with Judah brothers, so...

When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt. (37.28)

Reuben returns and tears his clothes in dismay; but to cover their crime the other brothers tear Joseph’s coat for an alibi. They drench it with a goat’s blood and run to Papa exclaiming, “We found this...” Father Jacob is forlorn, of course, while the deceitful sons silently celebrate what they imagine will be the “good riddance” end of his annoying favorite.

But this is just the beginning.

A Brief Window to the Ancient and Ignoble

The social dynamics in the Bible stories – sibling rivalries, family dysfunction, jealousy, self-serving deceit – are often so current-seeming that they could show up on a weeknight soap opera and inform our twenty-first century lives without a lot of translation work from us. That is a lovely thing! But occasionally, we bump into a passage that reminds us just how different biblical cultures could be from our own. The story of Judah and Tamar is one of those passages.

Tamar marries one of Joseph’s nephews and so finds herself in the extended family of Abraham and Sarah. That should be a good deal, right? She married Er, the first son of Judah (the capitalist above). Then, when Er dies young, Papa Judah promises to do the right thing (in that culture) and arrange a marriage for the widow with his very young son Shelah. She will simply need to wait for him to come of age.

Months and years pass, and Judah forgets his promise. In that culture a woman didn’t simply knock on the door and complain. In fact, Tamar was powerless over her own situation, until she concocted a plan: she traded in her mourning-widow clothes for a prostitute’s veil and stood at the city gate near the Temple precisely when father-in-law Judah was scheduled to walk by. Judah saw her, desired her, and arranged payment (a kid from the flock) so he could lie with her. Tamar also demanded that Judah leave his ID (his signet ring and cord) as collateral. They lay together, and Judah then went on with his life. (Apparently frequenting prostitutes was normal for him.).

Naturally, Tamar conceived with twins. Judah's representative, sent to deliver the kid from the flock, couldn't find "the temple prostitute" and retrieve the signet and cord, because Tamar had resumed her usual clothing. But Tamar's belly grew, of course, so

about three months later Judah was told, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the whore; moreover she is pregnant as a result of whoredom." And Judah (being the patriarch) said, "Bring her out, and let her be burned."

You can guess what happened next.

As Tamar was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, "It was the owner of these who made me pregnant." And she said, "Take note, please, whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff." ²⁶ Then Judah acknowledged them and said, "She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not lie with her again.

Which parts of this powerful passage "come home" to us? It is a poignant story of a powerless woman who found a way to take her life and future into her own hands. On the other hand, it is also the story of a backwards, brutal culture in which women bear the shame and of adultery and pay for it by a man's cruel sentence of excruciating execution.

The Bible is current and the Bible is ancient and that makes reading it well and responsibly a complex task. Christians in the United States rightly hope to bring the Bible's wisdom to bear on the many moral issues of our time. We do well, though, to recognize the cultural distance that ought to humble us as we do it.

Back to Joseph: The Slave Succeeds

If you ever went to Sunday School as a kid, or if you like Broadway musicals, you probably know how this story plays out. Far from wasting away in an Egyptian slave camp, Joseph somehow finds a way to thrive. He must have shown promise, because those swashbuckling slave traders snatched top dollar for him from no less a man than Potiphar, a high official in Pharaoh's court, and things just go well there. Joseph shows skill that leads to his advancement.

Joseph found favor in Potiphar's sight and attended him; he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. ⁵ From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and field. ⁶ So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge; and, with him there, he had no concern for anything but the food that he ate.

Potiphar's bored and lusty wife, whom Joseph jilts, throws this cruise ship off course for a time, when she accuses Joseph of rape and lands him in jail. But the notorious dreamer of the technicolor coat becomes the famous dream interpreter of Egypt. First, he reads the nocturnal wanderings of the cupbearer to the king, who's in the dungeon with Joseph. Then, when Pharaoh himself has troubling dreams, that newly-rehired cupbearer tells the ruler that he knows a guy.

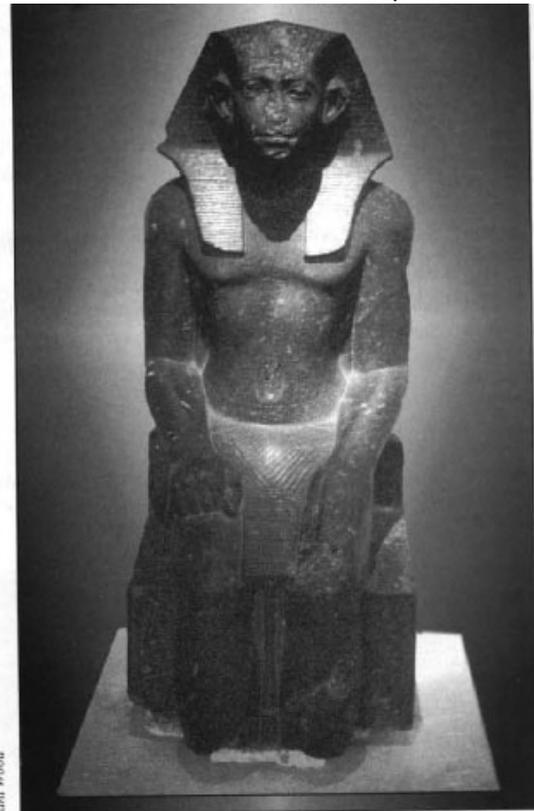
Pharaoh, at wit's end, summons Joseph into the Oval Office and tells his dreams of seven scrawny cows eating seven healthy ones and seven wimpy stalks of grain devouring seven robust ones. On cue, Joseph solves the puzzle: 7 bumper crops will precede 7 years of famine. So Joseph renders his counsel

"Now therefore let Pharaoh select a man who is discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt. ³⁴ Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land, and take one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven plenteous years. ³⁵ Let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming, and lay up grain under the authority of Pharaoh for food in the cities, and let them keep it. ³⁶ That food shall be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine that are to befall the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish through the famine." (40.33-36)

Joseph may not have known that he was writing his own job description – that he would be "man who is discerning and wise...set...over the land of Egypt" to secure the safety and health of the people. But a grateful Pharaoh hands him the keys to the kingdom and he administers a brilliant plan

and Egyptian food supplies stay steady through drought, while other nations suffer – including the clan of Joseph's father Jacob, up in the also-drought-ridden Promised Land. The plot thickens!

Sesostris III
A Pharaoh from around Joseph's Time



The Reunion

When we left Jacob's boys, the fields were bearing and the flocks were flourishing, and they had lied Papa into believing that his favorite son, Joseph, had tragically died. But in the period of the 7 scrawny cows and 7 wimpy stalks of grain from Pharaoh's dreams, famine belted their fields, just like all the others. But Jacob has gotten wind of the Egyptian Exception:

When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you keep looking at one another?² I have heard," he said, "that there is grain in Egypt; go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die."³ So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt.⁴ But Jacob did not send Joseph's brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he feared that harm might come to him.⁵ Thus the sons of Israel were among the other people who came to buy grain, for the famine had reached the land of Canaan.

Here come our scoundrels, hat in hand, to Egypt, where, of course, Joseph runs the world. Talk about Karma! Vegas oddsmakers could hardly get anyone to bet that this could go well. Let's remind ourselves that these guys planned to kill their brother; then they threw him into a pit; then they sold him on the slave market and persuaded their father not to come looking for him. In the dog-eat-dog world of sibling dynamics, this should be a massacre.

It looks at first like that's where we're headed:

Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground.⁷ When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke harshly to them.

Despite his brothers' pleading, Joseph throws all but one of them into jail and allows one to go fetch the youngest, whom their father Judah has kept at home so that he doesn't lose a second beloved son. Joseph then changes the terms, allowing all but one (Simeon) to carry grain back to their home, but requires that the youngest join them afterward, lest they be put to death. It's at this point, after three days in jail, contemplating this man's power and the danger they face, that Joseph's brothers recognize the moral structure of the universe.

They said to one another, "Alas, we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother; we saw his anguish when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen. That is why this anguish has come upon us."

It's about time!

The story continues with many trips back and forth. When the Egyptian provisions run out, Jacob has to send Benjamin the Beloved along to Egypt; then the same happens one more time, and they return and Joseph finally reveals his identity to them.

"I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.⁵ 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.⁸ So it was not you who sent me here, but God;

”

In time, they fetch Jacob and Joseph settles the whole family comfortably in the land of Goshen in Egypt.

The Power of Providence

“It was not you who sent me to Egypt, but God.” So, how does God transmute an act of human spite and malice, like the brothers’ decision to kill then throw then sell Joseph into slavery, into a way forward for a whole people and a whole world? These questions transport us into the very heart of that mysterious world called Providence.

In this remarkable story, the Bible pulls out a holy highlighter pen and helps us probe providence together. Why does Joseph not die on the Egyptian vine? Why does the slave-traders’ caravan roll right into Potiphar’s gin joint? What has moved this castaway kid’s plight out of the realm of randomness? Our narrator has jumped in many times along the way, before Joseph’s big reveal to his brothers in Egypt, with an explanation.

The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man; he was in the house of his Egyptian master. ³His master saw that the LORD was with him, and that the LORD caused all that he did to prosper in his hands. (39.2-3)

But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. ²²The chief jailer committed to Joseph’s care all the prisoners who were in the prison, and whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. ²³The chief jailer paid no heed to anything that was in Joseph’s care, because the Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper. (39.21-23)

Joseph knows what God is up to, also. Twice in his own words to Pharaoh he credits God with giving the ruler the dreams.

*God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do...
God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do...
the doubling of Pharaoh’s dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about. (41.25-32)*

Even Pharaoh comes to believe that a greater power is at work.

Pharaoh said to his servants, “Can we find anyone else like this—one in whom is the spirit of God?” ³⁹So Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has shown you all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. ⁴⁰You shall be over my house, and all

my people shall order themselves as you command; only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you.” (41.38-40)

This unlikely rise of a foreigner to the court of Pharaoh has an obvious answer for our storyteller: God helped.

This is not unique in the realm of religion or literature, as we know. The Trojan War and the travels of Odysseus would be bland, B minus tales of human conflict and discovery, if not for the intervention of Olympian gods who hop into the picture at opportune moments to move the action along. But if those Greek gods play out their rivalries within the pantheon on the battlefields of the Trojans, the God who attends Joseph seems to have designed a larger arc to these doings – the fulfillment of a promise made to Abraham and Sarah, the fulfillment of an encompassing plan to bless all the nations through this family.

When did you last identify an event or turn in your life or the lives around you as something God did?

How do we tell that kind apart from the other kind that seem to be “just the way the world goes”?

What are the benefits and risks of naming God as the cause of life events?

Would you rather err on the side of over-attributing things to God, or under-attributing them?

Looking Ahead

So ends the book of Genesis! We have finished our sprint through these powerful, troubling, life-giving, death-giving fifty chapters of Bible. So why do we have one more week of this study? Well, I imagine you have questions! Next week, our last session of the series will be your opportunity to ask them. We’ll engage in a good old-fashioned Q n A session – about Genesis and about matters our reading has opened. Come ready to ask them!