Joseph – Session 8

The story of Joseph is immediately recognizable as quite different in character from the patriarchal narratives that precede it. Whereas the patriarchal stories are episodic, infrequently lasting more than a single chapter, if that long, and quite often serve etiological purposes of one sort or another that attest to their antiquity, the Joseph material is quite the opposite. There are few if any etiologies in these chapters (and the few there are seem to be more related to Egypt than to Israel, such as the passage in Genesis 47 in which Egyptian royal ownership of all non-temple lands is traced back to Joseph's innovation!). And while there are scenes in the Joseph story, it is not episodic by any means, but is a continuous whole that begins in Genesis 37 and does not reach its logical conclusion until Genesis 50. For this reason the Joseph story has often been classified as a novella, more akin to the books of Esther and Ruth than to the rest of Genesis.

Yet for all its continuity and self-contained structure, there are indications that even the Joseph story is composed of multiple strands. This is clearest in the very first chapter, Genesis 37, where the narrative comes to a grinding halt in verse 28: "When Midianite traders passed by, they pulled Joseph out of the pit and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver, and they took Joseph to Egypt." On a plain reading, it would seem that although the brothers saw the Ishmaelites coming in v. 25, and decided to sell Joseph to them in v. 27, remarkably in v. 28 they were scooped by the Midianites, who stole Joseph from the pit where his brothers had placed him, and then sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites themselves. As if that weren't confusing enough, v. 36 then goes on to say that it was in fact the Midianites who sold Joseph to Potiphar in Egypt.

Genesis 37, like so many other chapters, can be divided neatly into two stories that are each complete and continuous. In one, from J, Joseph's brothers hate him because he is the favorite of Jacob and because of his dreams; they plan to kill him, but before they have a chance they see the Ishmaelites coming by and Judah convinces them to turn the murder into a profitable sale. They sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites, who bring him to Egypt, and the brothers then proceed to kill the kid and dip Joseph's coat in it, thereby completing the cycle of trickery inaugurated by Jacob back when he fooled Isaac into giving him Esau's blessing. In the E story, by contrast, Joseph's brothers hate him because he gives bad reports about them to Jacob, and they plan to kill him. Reuben, however, convinces the other brothers to throw Joseph into a pit instead of killing him with their own hands, with the intention of coming back later on and rescuing Joseph. But in that interim between throwing Joseph into the pit and Reuben's return, the Midianites come by and steal Joseph from the pit. Reuben is distraught, and the Midianites bring Joseph down to Egypt.

Although the rest of the Joseph story is less easy to separate into sources than Genesis 37, there are indications that the double strands continue throughout. Most notably, in Genesis 40, while speaking to Pharaoh's butler and baker, Joseph says "I was stolen from the land of the Hebrews" (40:15), in accordance with the E story; in Genesis 45, when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, he says "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt" (45:4).

Despite its inconsistencies, the canonical Joseph story has a fairly consistent message throughout, with a moral to the story that is stated by Joseph himself: "Although you intended me harm, God intended it for good" (50:20). After the regular divine appearances to the patriarchs, in the Joseph story God is suddenly conspicuously quiet. Everything that happens seems to be the result of chance or kismet (the appearances of the Ishmaelites and Midianites, the

butler and baker ending up with Joseph, Pharaoh's dreams, the famine that drives the brothers back to Joseph, etc.). The narrative as a whole testifies to faith in divine providence: the understanding that although God's hand may not be visible, one should trust that it is guiding events in the background, for the benefit of the faithful.

The prominence of this theme has led some scholars to see in the Joseph story an undercurrent of wisdom tradition, of the type found in the book of Proverbs. Trust in divine providence and the admission that humans have little control over events, and must therefore simply do the best that they can—these are all themes known to wisdom literature and seemingly present also in the Joseph story. Whether any direct connection between Joseph and wisdom can be drawn or not—though it should be noted that wisdom traditions were very much at home in Egypt of all Israel's neighbors—at the very least the Joseph story takes great advantage of the sort of vicissitudes that typify wisdom thought.

The ups and downs of the Joseph story take place on three levels. There is the level of the plot of the Joseph narrative: Joseph begins on a high note, as Jacob's favorite; he is quickly broughth low by his brothers' machinations; he is up again when Potiphar comes to trust him; down again after the episode with Potiphar's wife; apparently up when he interprets the butler's dream successfully; down again when the butler forgets him; and up to stay when Pharaoh's dreams lead to his appointment as vizier in Egypt. Perhaps in an attempt to make them feel the way he was made to, Joseph replicates this roller coaster ride in his treatment of his brothers when they appear in Egypt. He begins by treating them as spies; then he relents; but he demands that they leave one brother behind while they get Benjamin; when they return he treats them as honored guests; but he hides his cup in Benjamin's bag and accuses them of theft; finally he reveals himself and all is well.

The third level is the broadest: the Joseph story serves as a hinge or fulcrum point in the pentateuchal narrative writ large. The separation of Joseph from the rest of Jacob's sons seems a bad thing; as Joseph says, however, his presence in Egypt is what saves the Israelites from starvation when the famine hits. Yet it is because Joseph has the power to save the Israelites that Israel ends up in Egypt, and subject to the Egyptian oppression and enslavement that constitute Israel's lowest moments. Then again, without the oppression there could be no Exodus, the event that would come to define Israel as a people.

As the transition between the patriarchs and the Exodus account, the Joseph story plays a central role, and one that has been subject to much scholarly scrutiny. It is widely assumed that the patriarchal and Exodus narratives have independent origins as contradictory accounts of how Israel came to occupy Canaan. In the patriarchal version represented by Genesis, the land was promised to the patriarchs and their offspring, and this was the explanation for why the Israelites were where they were: because generation upon generation ago God had promised this land to their ancestors, and they had been there ever since. In the Exodus version, God brought the Israelites out of Egypt and through the wilderness and promised them the land of Canaan, but only after they conquered it and took it from its various native inhabitants (the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Jebusites, etc.). At some point, these two traditions of Israel's origins were brought together—probably through the process of fictive kinship that we saw already in the discussion of Jacob. But there was a logical problem in connecting these two traditions: one of them ended in Canaan, and the other started in Egypt. A narrative mechanism was needed to bring the two major blocks together into a single story, a means of getting Jacob's descendants from Canaan to Egypt so that they could be enslaved and brought back to Canaan again. The Joseph story is that narrative mechanism.

It seems likely that the Joseph story was created specifically to serve this larger purpose. This may well account for its novella-like character: it is not the product of the long accretion of oral traditions about Joseph, as the other patriarchal traditions were, but came into being fully formed, as it were.

It is for this reason that it is also unnecessary to look in the Joseph story for some trace of an historical event. Scholars have long been fascinated by the ostensible similarities between the story of Joseph and the period in Egyptian history when Egypt was ruled by a Semitic people know as the Hyksos. It has been posited that the cultural memory of a time when some early Canaanite peoples were in command of Egypt, even having their own pharaonic dynasty, might lie behind this notion of Joseph rising to such prominence in Pharaoh's court in Genesis. Yet this resemblance is superficial at best. Joseph looks much more like the common narratives of "the Jew in the foreign court," represented by Esther and Daniel in later biblical literature. It has also been shown that many of the references to Egyptian culture in the Joseph story are most at home in the first millennium BCE, rather than the seventeenth century BCE when the Hyksos ruled Egypt.

At the beginning and end of the Joseph story are two chapters that stand out from their contexts and are worth a moment's attention. Genesis 38 tells the story of Judah and Tamar. In this sort of narrative interlude, we hear about how Judah's sons died in succession, with Tamar being passed as wife from one to the next, until finally Judah refused to give her to his youngest son. Tamar, recognizing that Judah's behavior was condemning her to a life of perpetual widowhood, dressed as a prostitute and slept with Judah herself. When Judah discovers that she is pregnant, he orders her burned for—irony of ironies—"playing the harlot." Yet Tamar produces the items that Judah had given her as pledges for payment when he slept with her, and

Judah recognizes immediately what has happened. He admits the error of his ways at once: “She is more in the right than I” (Gen 38:26).

Despite the fact that this story seems to stand very much apart from the rest of the Joseph narrative, it is nonetheless deeply interwoven in the fabric of the Jacob cycle. Judah, it may be noted, is the victim of deception, revealed here in the very words that it is perpetrated in Genesis 27 and 37: “Recognize this.” Just as Isaac fails to recognize Jacob in disguise, and just as Jacob recognizes Joseph’s torn coat and falsely believes his son to be dead, so Judah recognizes his own possessions in Tamar’s hand and understands that he has done her wrong. Though this appears to be a story that condemns Judah, it is (like much in the Joseph narrative) a story in which ostensible bad turns out very much for the good. For the chapter ends with the births of Perez and Zerah, Judah and Tamar’s twins—and Perez will be, according to the conclusion to the book of Ruth, the ancestor of King David. The tale of Genesis 38 is an etiology for the Judahite origins of David: it is through Judah’s error in judgment, and his subsequent recognition of that error, that Israel’s great national history would come to be written.

Genesis 49 is in many ways a parallel text to Genesis 38, though they are entirely different in form. While Genesis 38 is a tightly drawn narrative, Genesis 49 contains a rambling poem, the purported last words of Jacob to his twelve sons, in which he tells them what their fates will be. What is said about each son is, of course, in fact a saying about the tribe that each would come to represent. These “tribal sayings” seem to have quite an ancient origin, perhaps going back in some cases before the period of the monarchy. Most are not in fact predictions, as they are presented in the narrative, but more like mottos (many of the sayings are either wordplays or animal metaphors).

The first three sayings, however (covering the four tribes of Reuben, Simeon and Levi, and Judah), are of a different character. The sayings about Reuben and Simeon and Levi effectively exclude those tribes from Jacob's inheritance and blessing. This is important because it clears the way for Judah to get the first real blessing, and to stand in essence as the eldest son. Like the story in Genesis 38, this poem sets the scene for Judah's rise to prominence in the period of David and Solomon. In Genesis 49, Judah's kingship is even explicitly mentioned: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet" (Gen 49:10). This saying, like those for Reuben and Simeon and Levi, has the form of prediction, but is surely not. The mention of kingship in Judah is a clear reference to the Davidic dynasty, and thus must be dated sometime in that period. This may serve as a reminder to us that although we can roughly date large segments of the Bible, these were not stable texts from the moment of their composition to the moment that we read them today. These are texts that have been reworked, supplemented, and edited over the generations, as historical circumstances changed. The poem in Genesis 49 may be generally one of the oldest pieces of writing in the entire Bible; the verses about Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and especially Judah, however, must be later.

Questions for discussion:

1. If Joseph (and the narrator) understand everything in his story to be pre-ordained by God for the purpose of saving the Israelites, can we talk about there being any villains in the narrative?
2. If the Joseph story leads to the enslavement in Egypt, then should we think of it positively or negatively? How do we fit individual episodes into the overall national trajectory?
3. How do the literary qualities of the Joseph story affect our sense of its historical veracity?

Reading:

Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 211–231.

Further Reading:

Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981) 3-12; 107-13; 159-77.