

LESSON 6

THE FORTUNES OF JOSEPH

Genesis 37:1–50:26

Aim

To see God's providential care and plan for His servant Joseph in the strange land of Egypt and to learn the historical circumstances leading to the enslavement of God's people by the Egyptians.

Introduction

The events in the life of Joseph are woven together in a well-constructed narrative with a dramatic plot. The stories are historical in character; however, no particular pharaoh is named. Potiphar, the captain of the guard (39:1), seems to be the same name as that of the priest of On (41:45). The priest's daughter Asenath was given in marriage to Joseph by Pharaoh. These names have not been identified with any individuals in history; therefore, they are no help in dating the narratives. The place named "the land of Rameses" (47:11), where Joseph is said to have settled his father and brothers, and the land of Goshen are equated by the writer. This region was the eastern delta of the Nile. Archaeology shows that Bedouin from the Sinai peninsula were permitted occasionally to enter the region and to pasture their flocks. Rameses belonged to the XIX Dynasty, and he is dated too late for the story of Joseph.

Hyksos, perhaps meaning "Bedouin princes" or "princes of the land," was the name used by the Egyptians to designate a body of invaders of a mixed race who conquered the delta region about 1730 B. C. Semitic elements were found among the invaders. The period following the expulsion of the Hyksos might correspond to the beginning of the reign of a new king "which knew not Joseph" (Exod. 1:8). Any foreign elements left in Egypt were subject to such treatments as is described in the early chapters of Exodus.

Joseph was the ideal son, brother, servant, and administrator. More is known about Joseph than any other character of the Old Testament, except David. His character was exemplary, and his faith in God was unshakable. The theme for the Joseph narrative is best expressed in his words to his brethren: "But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive" (50:20). The story emphasizes God's providential hand in the growth of a family into a nation. God's chosen people had a place in His redemptive plan, and the story shows how He preserved and provided for His people.

Joseph's Problems with His Brethren

Genesis 37:1-36

The enmity between Joseph and his brothers was the result of his own doing. He was the favourite son of Jacob because his

The land of Rameses in Egypt where Joseph had his father and brothers settle during the famine in Canaan is also called the _____ of _____.

(land, Goshen)

Invaders of a mixed race who invaded Egypt about 1730 B.C. were known as _____.

(Hyksos)

The period following expulsion of the Hyksos might be the time of the beginning of a new reign of kings who did not know _____.

(Joseph)

Joseph's character was _____ and his faith in God was _____.

(exemplary, unshakable)

mother was Rachel, Jacob's favourite wife. Joseph promoted Jacob's partiality by bringing an evil report to Jacob concerning his brothers. The sons of Jacob's concubines—Bilhah and Zilpah—were naturally jealous of their younger brother. The relations were not improved by Jacob's show of favouritism in the making of a coat of many colours for Joseph. Perhaps the coat marked him for the chieftainship of the tribes at his father's death. Ordinarily, this position would have been inherited by the eldest son. The six sons of Leah, as well as the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, were older than Joseph. Young Joseph was rather vain in boasting of his two dreams which indicated he would rule over his brothers. The repeated theme of the dreams conveyed the certainty of fulfilment. It is not surprising that his envious and embittered brothers sought a way to kill him.

When the other sons of Jacob tarried with their flocks in the vicinity of Shechem, Jacob became concerned about them and sent Joseph to inquire concerning their welfare. When they saw Joseph approaching, they conspired to kill him. The plan was to cast him into one of the pits, dip his multicoloured coat in the blood of a goat, and report to his father that a wild beast had slain him. Reuben, the oldest brother and the one to lose the most if Joseph became chieftain of the tribe, pleaded for Joseph's life. Judah suggested that they sell him to the Ishmaelites. According to verses 28-30, Midianite traders passed by and Joseph was sold to them. Perhaps the Midianites and Ishmaelites (vv. 26-28) were the same people. The Midianites were descendants of Abraham by Keturah (Gen. 25), and the Ishmaelites were descendants of Abraham by Hagar (Gen. 16).

The brethren deceived their aged father by leading him to think Joseph had been killed. He mourned bitterly for his son. The early sins of Jacob had returned to haunt him. He had deceived his father Isaac and robbed his own brother, whom his father loved dearly. Now he was betrayed by his own sons and made to believe that he had lost his favourite son.

Judah and Tamar

Genesis 38:1-30

The Joseph narrative is interrupted by the Judah-Tamar episode. Judah and Joseph were the central persons in Jacob's family history. Judah became the leader of his brethren and the ancestor of David. Joseph was a noble character through whom God preserved his chosen people. His purity and righteousness in Egypt were in contrast to Judah's immorality. Tamar was the ideal wife in Israel; she would do anything to give her deceased husband progeny (descendants) so that his name might be preserved. The writer of Genesis did not reprimand Tamar for her actions in tricking her father-in-law into giving her a child. She was doing her duty as a loyal wife and maintaining the family honour. The wicked Egyptian wife of Potiphar, on the other hand, is depicted as an evil woman who lured young men to their doom.

A number of marital customs of the day are reflected in the story. Judah parted from the others and dwelt among the Canaanites in Adullam, several miles southwest of Jerusalem. He married a Canaanite woman who bore him three sons. Judah took a wife by the name of Tamar for his elder son Er. Er died before having children; therefore, the second son Onan was expected to raise children by Tamar for his deceased brother. He refused to fulfil his duty and was slain. With two of his three sons dead, Judah was afraid to give Shelah, his youngest son, to Tamar lest he suffer the same fate as his brothers. Tamar was sent back to her father's house until Shelah became old enough to have children

Enmity between Joseph and his brothers was provoked in the following ways:

1. Joseph's bringing an _____ concerning his brothers to his father.
2. The _____ of many colors which Jacob gave to Joseph.
3. Joseph's boasting of his _____ which indicated he would rule over his brothers.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

Which two of Joseph's brothers wished to spare his life? _____ and _____

(Reuben, Judah)

The central persons in Jacob's family history were _____ and _____

(Joseph, Judah)

A character contrast between _____ and _____ is shown clearly in the Judah-Tamar incident in Genesis 38.

(Joseph, Judah)

for his brother.

When Judah failed to fulfil his obligation to Tamar by giving Shelah to perform his duty for her, she devised a plan in which she put off her widow's garment and veiled herself like a prostitute. Judah turned to her, thinking she was a prostitute, and placed in her hand personal possessions until he sent the kid from the flock in payment to her. Three months later, he was informed that Tamar had played the harlot. Judah sentenced her to death by burning, one of the methods of death for adultery. When she was brought out to receive her punishment, she revealed the signet, the cord, and the staff which Judah had given her in order to prove the real father of her child. Judah recognized them and admitted his own guilt in having refused to give his son Shelah to her. Tamar appears among the names of the ancestors of the Messiah (Matt. 1:3). Her actions would be justly condemned today, but in her own culture she acted within her rights.

The Trials of Joseph

Genesis 39:1-23

Joseph was far from home and in the midst of the lax moral life of Egypt, but he was able to withstand the temptations and maintain purity. His moral behaviour far exceeded that of his brother, especially Judah, and his father before him.

Joseph had become the slave of Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh. He was obedient, honest, and completely reliable. The writer recorded five times that it was the Lord who caused him to succeed. The Egyptian's house was made to prosper because of Joseph's presence. "The Lord was with Joseph" indicates the overruling providence of God in offsetting the loneliness and misery of a young man far from home.

When Potiphar's wife attempted to seduce the handsome slave, Joseph declared his loyalty to his master and to his God (v. 9). He placed obedience to God's laws above the gratification of his own passion. Potiphar's wife failed in her plan, and she brought false charges against Joseph and caused him to be cast into prison. The Lord did not forsake Joseph even in prison; He continued to make him prosper (vv. 21-23).

Joseph's Success in Dream Interpretation

Genesis 40: 1-41:57

After Joseph had been in prison for some time, the king's butler and baker were cast into prison for offending their master. Joseph was placed in charge of the new prisoners until their fates were decided. One night both the butler and the baker had strange dreams. They told Joseph they were unable to interpret their dreams, and he asked, "Do not interpretations belong to God?" (40:8). God alone knows the future, and the one to whom God reveals His secrets is the only one who can interpret them. Joseph correctly interpreted the future events revealed in the dreams. The butler was to be restored to his position, but the baker was to be hanged. Joseph requested that the butler remember him when the butler was restored to his position. The butler promptly forgot him.

Two years later, Pharaoh dreamed of seven slick and fat cows which came up from the Nile. They were followed by seven ugly and gaunt cows which ate up the seven slick and fat cows. The dream was repeated with seven thin, scorched ears of corn swallowing up seven full ears of corn. The magicians and wise men of Egypt were unable to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, and only then did the chief butler remember the young Hebrew in prison. After being informed by Pharaoh that no one else had

Circle the correct word or words.

Tamar's actions (were, were not) within bounds of marital custom in her own culture.

(Circle *were*)

Read Genesis 39. Write the recurring theme in the accounts concerning Joseph. Then list references of several verses in which it appears.

Theme: _____

Verses: 1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

(Theme: Jehovah was with him; Genesis 39:2, 21, 23)

been able to interpret his dreams, Joseph replied, "It is not in me: God shall give Pharaoh an answer of peace" (41:16). Joseph interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh to mean that there would be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. The fact that the dreams had been given twice indicated that the years of plenty and famine were predetermined by God.

Joseph gave practical advice concerning preparation for the famine. He suggested that a discreet, wise man be selected to oversee the preparation in which one-fifth of the produce of the land would be stored during the plenteous years. Pharaoh agreed with Joseph's suggestions and decided that Joseph was the wise man who should be chief administrator of the government's food conservation plan. Joseph was made second only to Pharaoh in the government of Egypt.

According to Genesis, God was the coordinating factor in all of these events. The dreams of the butler and the baker could have been interpreted only by God. Not only was God the interpreter of Pharaoh's dreams, but He was the giver of the dreams to reveal the approaching years of famine. God actually guided the state of affairs in Egypt through his servant Joseph. He was given a signet ring and a golden necklace plus an Egyptian wife, who was the daughter of an Egyptian priest. The nature of the gifts may indicate that Joseph was responsible for exercising both civil and religious authority in preparing for the approaching famine. In the midst of his unusual success in Egypt, Joseph forgot his troubles and his father's household. Two sons were born to him.

Joseph's Reunion with His Brothers

Genesis 42:1-45:28

As predicted in the dreams, the seven years of famine came after seven years of productivity. The famine reached the land of Canaan and affected Jacob and his sons. Apparently the famine was interpreted as God's punishment for their sins (42:21). In desperation the ten brothers were sent to Egypt to buy food.

The attitude of the ten sons had changed through the years. They were no longer the envious, stubborn young men of an earlier period. They suggested to Joseph that they were honest (42:11, 31). This could not have been said about them during the time of their betrayal of Joseph and Jacob. The author of Genesis was careful to point out their lingering guilt concerning the mistreatment of Joseph and the deception of their father (42:21-22). At the same time the writer portrayed the righteousness and mercy of Joseph (42:24-25).

Joseph was concerned about the well-being of his father and Benjamin. He accused the ten of being spies and placed them in prison for three days. He became more lenient and held only one of them. The others returned to Canaan with the food, promising to return and to bring the youngest brother with them. Their money was placed secretly in their bags of grain. When the brothers discovered the money in their bags, they cried out in fear, "What is this that God hath done unto us?" (42:28). Their guilt caused them to fear that God's judgement was continuing upon them.

When Jacob learned that Simeon had been retained in prison, he accused the remaining sons of taking both Joseph and Simeon from him. The brothers' sense of guilt was increased. Jacob refused to permit his only remaining son of Rachel to return with Reuben to Egypt until the famine threatened them with starvation.

As the famine continued in the land, the requirement of the governor of Egypt was repeated to Jacob by his sons. He finally agreed to Benjamin's going with them for additional grain. Jacob

To whom did Joseph give credit for his ability to interpret dreams? _____
(God)

God actually guided the state of affairs in Egypt through His servant _____
(Joseph)

Circle the correct word or words.
At the time Joseph's brothers came to Egypt for grain they (had, had not) changed their envious, stubborn attitudes.
(Circle *had*.)

The money was placed in the brothers' bags of grain to cause them to fear that God's _____ was continuing upon them.
(judgement)

suggested that they take a present to the Egyptian official along with the money which they had found in their bags. Joseph was overjoyed at seeing his brother Benjamin (43:16), and he prepared a banquet for his brothers in his own house. Because of the lavish treatment, they became suspicious that Joseph was setting a trap for them. A guilty conscience causes even blessings to become occasions of fear. They approached Joseph's steward to explain how the money was found in their sacks and to assure him they were returning it. The steward set them at ease by stating, "The God of your father has given you treasure in your sacks; I had your money" (43:23—NASB). Joseph probably had instructed the Egyptian steward what to say. Joseph was brought to tears when he saw his younger brother Benjamin and inquired concerning his father Jacob. When they ate, Joseph sat separately since it was an abomination for Egyptians to eat with Hebrews (43:32). The brothers were astonished at the strange proceedings: Benjamin was given five times as much as any of the others.

The steward once again tested the sincerity of the brothers. Their sacks were filled, and the money was placed in the mouths of the sacks. In addition, the silver cup of the prime minister was put in the sack of the youngest. After the brothers had departed, they were overtaken and accused of evil deeds. The implication was made that the stolen silver cup was used for divination. When it was discovered in Benjamin's sack, the brothers returned submissively to the city. They were given opportunity to defend themselves before Joseph, and Judah stated, "God hath found out the iniquity of thy servants" (44:16). After Judah's confession, Joseph decreed that only the guilty one should be held in Egypt as a servant. The sincerity of the brothers was demonstrated as Judah pleaded for the release of Benjamin and offered to suffer vicariously for Benjamin (44:33).

The author of Genesis used effectively the narratives of Joseph to demonstrate the providence of God. Even the hatred and jealousy of Joseph's brethren which resulted in his enslavement in Egypt were used of God to bring about victory. In adverse circumstance in Egypt, God tested Joseph by the wickedness of Potiphar's wife and found him to be faithful. In the narratives, the writer also showed that God is able to convict man of his sin and make him aware of the need of forgiveness. Although the betrayal of Joseph and the deception of Jacob had taken place thirteen years previously, the guilt continued to linger in the hearts of the brothers and was used of God to bring them to confession and repentance.

The narratives reach a climax at the end of chapter 44. Joseph could no longer keep from expressing his emotions; therefore, he identified himself to his brothers (45:1). Of uppermost concern was the welfare of his father. As his brothers stood speechless Joseph attempted to allay their fears by assuring them that although they sold him, God sent him to Egypt in order to preserve life (45:5). God's grace continues to work in spite of man's wickedness. Joseph gave God credit for what had taken place (45:7-9), including his exaltation as a high officer in Egypt.

Joseph instructed his brothers to return to Canaan and bring their father to the land of Goshen in Egypt. He stated that in Goshen his family would be near him (45:10). This statement reveals that the court of Pharaoh was not far from Goshen. This situation fits the Hyksos period of Egyptian history when the capital was in Avaris (Tanis). The Hyksos invaded Egypt and ruled over the land from about 1710 to 1550 B. C. Their capital was in Lower Egypt, the delta region of the Nile. Exodus 12:40 indicates the Israelites were in Egypt 430 years. If Joseph rose to power in Egypt at the time of the coming of the Hyksos (Canaanite stock), the Exodus would have taken place about 1275 B. C.

Religious teachings which are prominent in the narratives of Joseph are:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

(Compare your answer with the text.)

The Israelites in Egypt

Genesis 46:1-50:26

Chapter 46 opens with Jacob's seeking divine approval for going down to Egypt. At Beersheba he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. He was promised that his nation would become great in Egypt and would be brought up again from Egypt. Jacob was also promised that Joseph would be present for his burial. The genealogy of those who went to Egypt is given in 46:8-27. The remainder of the chapter describes the reunion of Joseph and Jacob and the instructions given to Jacob when Pharaoh inquired concerning his occupation.

Chapter 47 records the introduction of Pharaoh to five of Joseph's brothers. Pharaoh inquired concerning their occupation, and they answered that they had been shepherds. Genesis 46:34 indicates that shepherds were loathsome to the Egyptians, but the admission of their occupation resulted in their receiving the best land in Egypt for pastures. Although shepherds were repulsive to the Egyptians, they may not have been to the Hyksos. Pharaoh commented on the age of Jacob, who admitted that he was not as old as his forefathers but that his years had been difficult. Perhaps Jacob was aware that his sins had been the cause of some of his troubles.

The covenant promise of being a blessing to other people had a physical fulfillment during the famine. Egyptians, also faced with starvation, came to Joseph for food. During the first year they used their money to buy food from the government. In succeeding years they used their cattle and their land. The property came into the hands of the government, and the people worked the land for the government, keeping eighty per cent and giving twenty per cent to Pharaoh (47:13-26). Previously, the land may have been controlled by a few wealthy people. After the famine the land was available to the multitudes.

Jacob died when he was 147 years old. Before his death he requested to be carried out of the land of Egypt and to be buried with his fathers (47:27-31).

In chapter 48 the ceremony of making an oath and perpetuating the Covenant through the descendants included placing the hands in the hollow of the thigh. Perhaps this implied a passing on of covenant consciousness and responsibility. The two sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, were adopted as Jacob's sons, thus explaining why there was no Joseph tribe. In blessing the sons of Joseph, Jacob reserved the greater blessing for the younger son. Jacob's including the sons of Joseph as his adopted heirs caused Joseph to receive a double portion of his father's inheritance.

Chapter 49 probably contains one of the oldest pieces of Hebrew poetry. Much of the poem was prophetic. Jacob knew his sons well enough to be able to forecast the future developments. Although Reuben was the first-born, he was severely reprimanded for his weakness of character. Simeon and Levi were rebuked for their deeds of violence. Judah would be praised by his brothers because of his strength in battle. Kingly authority would not pass from Judah. His strong character was demonstrated by his mediating role in the treatment of Joseph (Gen. 37) and by his willingness to serve as ransom for Benjamin (Gen. 44). The last two verses of the Judah oracle (vv. 11-12) have been identified with the Messianic Age. Not only would the kingship not depart from Judah, but the king would come riding on an ass and tie his beast to a vine. An abundance of harvest was implied.

Zebulun would dwell by the seashore. Issachar was chided for living in ease and would become a slave for a foreign master.

Fill in the blanks with either "Egyptians" or "Hyksos." Read Genesis 46:34 and chapter 47.

Shepherds were loathsome to_____.

Shepherds may not have been so despised by the_____.

Since Joseph's brothers and father received the best land in Egypt even after stating they were shepherds, it is possible that the rulers at that time in Egypt were_____.

(Compare your answers with the scripture and text.)

Read in Genesis 48 how the covenant promise continued to be fulfilled. 1. Which son of Joseph received the greater blessing?_____.

2. What was the older son's name? _____.

(1-Ephraim; 2-Manasseh)

What kind of writing is chapter 49 of Genesis?

(Hebrew poetry)

What was the nature of the poetry?_____.

(Prophetic)

Dan, although his tribe was small, would be shrewd in attacks against the enemy. Gad would be able to maintain his freedom against the attacks of the Bedouin. Asher would receive the fertile strip above Mount Carmel and would be blessed with ample food. Naphtali would possibly enjoy prosperity. Joseph, who had suffered mistreatment, would be blessed above all the others. The warlike character of Benjamin was noted. Chapter 49 ends with Jacob's request to be buried in the field of Machpelah.

Chapter 50 records the mourning of the death of Jacob, the embalming of his body, and the burial in Canaan. The chapter closes with Joseph's request to be buried in Canaan, also, and with a note of his death at the age of 110 years.

The son of Jacob who was most outstanding in Israel's history was_____.

(Joseph)

Home Study Exercise

Basic activity (Levels 1, 2, and 3). After reading Genesis 37–50 and the study manual, do the following exercise.

1. Where did Jacob's family settle in Egypt? _____

2. Who were the Hyksos, and why were they important? _____

3. Give three reasons for the enmity between Joseph and his brothers. _____

4. Name the two brothers who interceded for Joseph and why they interceded.

5. Why was the Judah-Tamar incident placed in the midst of the Joseph narrative?

6. Should Tamar's actions be approved or condemned? Why? _____

7. What is the recurring emphasis in the Joseph narratives? _____

8. Why was the money placed in the bags of grain? _____

9. Name three religious teachings the author of Genesis emphasized in the narratives of Joseph.

10. What indication does chapter 47 give that the rulers of Egypt may have been Hyksos rather than Egyptians?

11. How was the covenant promise—to be a blessing to other people—physically fulfilled during the famine?

12. Usually the first-born son was privileged and prominent. Which of the twelve sons of Jacob was the most prominent in Israel's history? _____

Supplementary assignment (Levels 2 and 3). Read pages 61–67 in *A Nation In the Making* and the following:

1. What is the key to understanding the theology in the Joseph narratives?
2. List the times the Lord turned defeat into victory in the life of Joseph.
3. Give a brief outline of the Joseph narratives.
4. What was Joseph's strategy in demanding that Benjamin be brought to Egypt?

Advanced activity (Level 3). Read pages 100–127 in *The Book of Genesis* by Fritsch and do the following.

1. Give and explain the reasons Joseph was hated by his brothers.
 2. Compare and contrast the actions of Tamar and Potiphar's wife.
 3. What evidence is there that Joseph may have participated in Egyptian religious rituals?
 4. In the experiences of the brothers, how did God use their sins?
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Seminar Discussion

1. In what ways did Jacob reap in later years what he had sown earlier?
2. What was Joseph's reason for treating his brothers as he did when they came to Egypt for food?
3. What lessons concerning getting along with people can be learned from the experiences of Joseph?
4. What were the theological purposes of the author of Genesis in relating the extensive story of Joseph?
5. What is revealed about God through the Joseph story?