

Sacred Space in Promise: The Patriarchal Period – Jacob’s Exile in Egypt

I. The Introduction of Joseph

1. Immediately following Esau’s genealogy the narrative turns to Jacob’s genealogy, *but for the purpose of introducing the Joseph story, which suggests his key role in Jacob’s family.*
2. Joseph is the primary character in the balance of Genesis, and the reason is obvious: *Joseph was at the center of the covenant household finding itself in exile in Egypt.*

“The long and distinct Joseph narratives close the Book of Genesis. As the theme in the Jacob cycle was the establishment of the twelve tribes of Israel, the theme of the Joseph narratives is Israel’s remarkable preservation outside the Promised Land. As such, the Joseph account functions as a bridge between the patriarchal narratives and the Book of Exodus, tying the promises to the fathers with the pending occupation of the land. Joseph is presented as the preserver not only of Israel’s traditions, but of Israel herself.” (Dumbrell, The Faith of Israel)

II. Exile in Egypt (Genesis 27-50)

1. Joseph’s story is key to the Egyptian exile, which is itself a core biblical theme.
2. Joseph’s story begins with two prophetic dreams that pointed to his future status in his family. *Moreover, those dreams were instrumental in the fulfillment of what they disclosed.*
 - a. Joseph’s dreams were a catalyst in his brothers’ betrayal and his exile from Canaan.
 - b. The preeminence the dreams revealed was to be realized through Joseph’s subjugation as the first among the Abrahamic family to be exiled in Egypt.
3. Sold as a slave, Joseph was exalted to become head in Potiphar’s house, only to then be unjustly imprisoned, where he once again rose to preeminence as head over all prisoners.
4. This repeated oscillation between subjugation and exaltation was orchestrated by *three pairs of dreams*. *ref. 37:5-11, 40:5-17, 41:1-7
 - a. The first pair predicted Joseph’s supremacy, but led to his subjugation, while the second two pairs came in the midst of his subjugation, but led to his exaltation.
 - b. The second pair were the foundation for the third, which resulted in Joseph being exalted to become lord over all Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. *Thus the final pair served to fulfill the first pair; **Joseph obtained preeminence over his family, but in an unforeseen and startling way – through abuse, enslavement, degradation and unjust suffering.***
 - c. And as exalted lord, Joseph became the *source of life* for all the near-eastern world of that time (41:56-57), hearkening back to the promise in Eden of a life-restoring “seed.”

*The one who had suffered and “died” because of the sins of others had become, through his ordeal, the appointed agent of their deliverance and preservation. By his “death” and subsequent exaltation Joseph was made the possessor of “life” – the one who alone could vanquish death through the provision of “living bread” to all the nations. * 45:1-7*

5. When Jacob learned that Joseph was alive and ruling over all Egypt, he determined to journey there with his entire household. *At Beersheba, where Jacob was about to cross the boundary of the promised land and begin his second and final exile, the covenant God again spoke to him, assuring Jacob that He would abide with him and uphold His covenant promises to him, just as He had done years earlier in Haran.* * 45:25-46:4

- a. At this point the narrator returned to Jacob's genealogy, *thus directly associating this final generations section with the covenant household's exile in Egypt.* * 46:8-27
- b. The various exiles of the three patriarchs had now culminated with the exile of their descendents. *This hearkened back to God's covenant pledge to Abraham (Gen. 15:12-14), indicating to the reader what lay ahead for the covenant household.*

Like Joseph, the nation of Israel would move quickly from prominence to abasement. But also like him, at the appointed time God's favor and power would raise them from their humiliation to glorious exaltation. * cf. 47:27-31, 50:24-26

6. In Egypt and nearing his death, Jacob called his sons to bless them, underscoring that the covenant line was expanding: *Israel, the man, was becoming Israel, the nation.*

- a. Jacob blessed his twelve sons, and the process of blessing attested Joseph's preeminence (as his dreams predicted), but a *covenantal* preeminence. * ref. 49:22-26 with 48:1-22
- b. Jacob prefaced his blessings with the announcement of his impending death, *charging his sons to return his body to Canaan and bury him there in the cave in the field of Machpelah where his father and grandfather were buried.* * 48:28-32

More than a burial request, Jacob was affirming his faith in his God. He believed that exile in Egypt wasn't the end of God's faithfulness to His covenant and its promises.

- c. Jacob's sons honored his demand when he died and then returned to Egypt, but in the hope of following their father one day. *The man Israel had ended his exile and entered his rest in God's sanctuary land, and so it would be with the house of Israel.*
7. Jacob's death rekindled his sons' fear of retribution, but Joseph reminded them that he had long since forgiven them. So his response to them brings his story to its climax. * 50:15-21

*Joseph's story began with two dreams whose message had now come to pass. But that fulfillment reflected and advanced the purpose and covenant promises of the God behind the dreams – the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Thus Joseph declared to his brothers that **God had brought him to Egypt and exalted him through humiliation and unjust suffering in order that he should be the savior of the covenant family, but also the wider world.***

8. Genesis ends with Joseph's death and his request echoing his father's (50:22-26). *He however, would remain in Egypt, unburied, until the time when he would depart with all of his brethren.* He, like them, would die in faith, confident that his God would prove faithful.

Thus Joseph and his story made a monumental contribution to the unfolding salvation history. Joseph played a vital role in advancing Israel's history and covenant relationship with God, but he also served as an important typological and prophetic figure in God's process of disclosing and building His case for the Abrahamic ruler and savior to come.