

Genesis 50: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Genesis chapter 50 Then Joseph fell on his father's face and wept over him and kissed him. And Joseph commanded his servants, the physicians, to embalm his father.

So the physicians embalmed Israel. Forty days were required for it, for that is how many are required for embalming. And the Egyptians wept for him seventy days. And when the days of weeping for him were passed, Joseph spoke to the household of Pharaoh, saying, If now I have found favour in your eyes, please speak in the ears of Pharaoh, saying, My father made me swear, saying, I am about to die in my tomb that I hewed out for myself in the land of Canaan.

There shall you bury me. Now therefore, let me please go up and bury my father. Then I will return. And Pharaoh answered, Go up and bury your father, as he made you swear.

So Joseph went up to bury his father. With him went up all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his household, and all the elders of the land of Egypt, as well as all the household of Joseph, his brothers, and his father's household.

Only their children, their flocks, and their herds were left in the land of Goshen. And there went up with him both chariots and horsemen. It was a very great company. When they came to the threshing floor of Attad, which is beyond the Jordan, they lamented there with a very great and grievous lamentation.

[1 : 2 3] And he made a mourning for his father seven days. When the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, saw the mourning on the threshing floor of Attad, they said, This is a grievous mourning by the Egyptians.

Therefore the place was named Abel Mizraim. It is beyond the Jordan. Thus his sons did for him as he had commanded them. For his sons carried him to the land of Canaan, and buried him in the cave in the field of Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite, to possess as a burying place.

After he had buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt with his brothers, and all who had gone up with him to bury his father. When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him.

So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, Your father gave this command before he died. Say to Joseph, Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.

And now please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father. Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, Behold, we are your servants.

[2 : 3 9] But Joseph said to them, Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

So do not fear. I will provide for you and your little ones. Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. So Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father's house.

Joseph lived 110 years. And Joseph saw Ephraim's children of the third generation. The children also of Machia, the son of Manasseh, were counted as Joseph's own.

And Joseph said to his brothers, I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this place to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here. So Joseph died, being 110 years old.

[3 : 39] They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt. In Genesis chapter 50, the stories of Jacob and Joseph finally reach their end. And the book is concluded.

Jacob has twice made a solemn charge, once to Joseph, and then once to the brothers, that he be buried in Canaan. He made Joseph take an oath to him, that he would do so.

They're not just living as regular sojourners within the land now, though. They are people with privileged positions, with great land given to them, and with positions of authority and influence within the ruling administration.

Joseph has two father figures in his life. He has his father Jacob, and he has Pharaoh. He spent the first 17 years of his life with his father Jacob, and then the last 17 years of his father's life with him.

But in the interim period, he was separated from his father. He didn't know if his father was involved in sending him down to Egypt. He was raised to new authority by Pharaoh. Pharaoh gave him a new job, a new name, and even a wife.

[4 : 44] And so there are these two father figures whose interests compete. And the question is, who will ultimately have his loyalty? After Jacob dies, he's embalmed.

The embalming process takes about 40 days, and then there's a period of mourning for about 70 days. Quite likely, the embalming period is within that 70 days. This was a huge event.

This is the father of the saviour of the nation, and he is being mourned like a royal figure. And as such a figure, he's going to be embalmed, he's going to be placed in the casket, and he's going to be buried in a very magnificent tomb.

But yet, there's a twist in the tale. Joseph speaks to the people of the household of Pharaoh, not Pharaoh directly, but indirectly, and says that he was made to swear by his father that he'll be buried in the land of Canaan.

Now, what's the purpose of the embalming? It seems to this point that it's the typical preparation for the Egyptian afterlife. Here is a body being prepared for an Egyptian funeral and burial.

[5 : 51] But yet, for Joseph, the preparation is so that the body can be transported to somewhere different entirely, that it might be taken out of Egypt and brought to the cave of Machpelah and buried there.

This is quite a startling request that he makes of Pharaoh. Here is the saviour of the people, who was sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers, and yet has risen to the highest heights of authority in Egypt.

He's someone with influence and power second only to Pharaoh himself. His family has been given this vast land that they can occupy. They have great riches and wealth and influence.

They have high authority and positions of power. And now the patriarch of this people has requested to be buried in the land of Canaan. Don't they recognise that Egypt is their new home?

You can imagine why Joseph approaches this request rather gingerly. They've just had 70 days of mourning for this guy. This guy is treated as Egyptian royalty.

- [6 : 54] And now Joseph is asking for that body to be buried elsewhere. Something seems to be ungrateful about this request. But Joseph does have a benefit in the fact that he was made to swear by his father to bury his body in the land of Canaan.
- This means it's not just his choice. He is bound by filial responsibility to his father. And that gives him some leverage in the conversation with Pharaoh and his household.
- While Pharaoh is not probably very pleased about this request, he accepts it. And Joseph goes up to bury his father. But he is not alone. He is accompanied by all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his household, the elders of the land of Egypt, and all the household of Joseph, his brothers, his father's household, and just the children and the flocks are left behind.
- Far from just grudgingly accepting this, the Egyptians are fully involved. They provide an honour guard for the funeral procession to the land of Canaan. And they take the long way round.
- They go beyond the far side of the Jordan rather than straight up to Hebron. And they wait some days on the far side of the Jordan. And then Joseph and his brothers cross and bury their father.
- [8 : 09] And why do they take this particular route? Well, I think in part because it's the same route as they later take in the Exodus. Their father, Israel, is the one who bears the name of the people.
- And he's buried in the land. He represents the destiny of his sons, that his sons will one day follow him back. And perhaps one of the most interesting features of this particular narrative is the suggestion that the Egyptians could have played a role in that story too, if things had been otherwise.
- In this story, Pharaoh is being presented with a difficult request concerning a son that had to prefer loyalty to his true father over loyalty to him.
- See, similarities maybe between Moses and Joseph. Moses is taken into the royal family but ultimately identifies with Israel. Israel is God's firstborn son.
- It's not God's only son, but it is God's firstborn son. And God says to Pharaoh, let my people go. That demand is not dissimilar from the demand that Jacob makes upon Pharaoh.
- [9 : 16] Let my son go, that he may serve me, that he may bring me to the land and bury me in the land. Recognize that he is my son ultimately, not your son.
- And while he may rule wisely in your kingdom and in your name, ultimately he belongs to a different father. He is not yours. Let my firstborn son go.
- And that possibility that Pharaoh would have let Israel go is one that is held out within this chapter. If Pharaoh had submitted to the will of this father in the same way as the earlier Pharaoh submitted to the will of Jacob concerning his son Joseph, then things could have been very different.
- Rather than chariots pursuing to be destroyed in the Red Sea, chariots could have gone up with Israel as an honor guard, recognizing again that Israel is God's firstborn son, but not his only son.
- Egypt can be seen as a son of God too. Egypt can enter into the blessing that Israel has. Instead of a pursuing party, they could have been an honor guard. After all of this takes place, after the death of Jacob, there is another crisis that arises.
- [10 : 28] The question of whether Joseph has truly forgiven the brothers, or whether merely for the sake of his father he delayed his vengeance upon them. Think back to the story of Esau, who said that he would, when his father died, that he would kill Jacob.

In a similar manner, perhaps Joseph is just delaying his wrath until Jacob dies. And so the brothers deal with Joseph indirectly through messengers, in a similar way to the way that Joseph deals with Pharaoh's household.

They relay a message that Jacob supposedly gave concerning the brothers before he died. Now I think it's unlikely that Jacob actually gave that message. Rather, they're trying to save themselves, using the authority of their father as leverage.

It is interesting to observe the way that they speak of God in this context. They speak of the God of your father. Your father, not our father. and the God of your father.

As if Joseph had a closer relationship not just with Jacob, but also with God. Their relationship, both with Jacob and also to an extent with God, is mediated by Joseph's relationship with them.

[11 : 41] But Joseph's peaceful response emphasizes God's sovereignty in history. God is in control of the course of events, not ultimately human will.

In a famous statement, Joseph says to them, As for me, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive as they are today.

This echoes the statements of chapter 45. Do not be distressed or angry with your souls because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to keep alive for you many survivors.

So it was not you who sent me here, but God. And then later on, God has made me Lord of all Egypt. Joseph's recognition of God's hand in the control of the events of history allows him to forgive his brothers, to recognize that their agency is not the ultimate decider of events, but God's purpose.

And in light of that, to be able to show mercy and grace to people who had sought his harm. Joseph dies at the age of 110 years.

[12 : 56] And as we've gone through the stories to these points, we've noticed the pattern to be observed in the age of the patriarchs. Abraham being 175 years old, 7 times 5 squared.

Isaac being 180 years old, 5 times 6 squared. Jacob being 147 years old, 3 times 7 squared.

And now Joseph, 1 times 5 squared plus 6 squared plus 7 squared. There's a progression from 7, 5, 3, 1, and then ascending squares.

5 squared, 6 squared, 7 squared, and then 5 squared plus 6 squared plus 7 squared. This progression is an interesting mathematical feature of the text, but I think there's a deeper theological significance here.

The destiny of the family of Abraham is played out through the various lines of that family. The destiny of each character is developed in the next. And we've seen this in the emphasis upon the way that the characters pass things on to the next generation through blessings and also the role of the next generation in burying their fathers and the loyalty to their fathers as they continue their legacy.

[14 : 11] Also in the way that God is named in reference to the father, the God of your father Abraham to Isaac, the fear of Isaac to Jacob, the God of your father to Joseph.

In each of these cases we're seeing a developing line of blessing, a developing line of God's covenant commitment to his people through history. It's a cumulative story.

Joseph makes the sons of Israel swear that they will bring up his bones from the land of Egypt. Now he's not getting them to bring his bones up immediately as in the case of Jacob.

Rather he's anticipating a later departure from the land that his bones are held as a guarantee that that will in fact take place. And as they are left in the land of Egypt the promise is that they will go up at one point in the future.

Usually when we read about a character's death and being put in a tomb it's the end of the story. But this is the end of the book of Genesis but it's not the end of the story of Joseph's body.

[15 : 16] Joseph's bones are the beginning of a later story. They set things up for the story of the Exodus, the deliverance of those bones from the land of Egypt and the burial of those bones within the land of Canaan.

Now the fate of Joseph's bones frames the whole story of the Exodus. In Exodus chapter 13 verse 19 in the context of the description of Israel leaving the land of Egypt we read Moses took the bones of Joseph with him for Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear saying God will surely visit you and you shall carry up my bones with you from here.

And the end of the book of Joshua has a number of echoes of the end of the book of Genesis. It ends with the story of Joshua's death and his burial and then it mentions the bones of Joseph.

As for the bones of Joseph which the people of Israel brought up from Egypt they buried them at Shechem in the piece of land that Jacob bought from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for a hundred pieces of money.

It became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph. And that is at the very end of the story of the conquest of the land. So at the very beginning of them leaving Egypt and at the very end of the conquest of the land the bones of Joseph turn up.

[16 : 36] Joseph's statement concerning his bones is not just something tagged on at the end of a book as the narrative energy dies down. Rather it sets things up for what's going to happen in the future.

And once again the author of Hebrews appreciated this. By faith Joseph at the end of his life made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.

The fate of Joseph's bones and the fate of Israel are bound together. So the faith of Jacob is seen in sending his body ahead of Israel and the faith of Joseph is seen in the promise that they will one day go up with his body with his bones.

The story of Joseph is the story of the lost son of the son that goes down into Egypt. A story like the story of Ishmael and the story of the exodus is the story of bringing back the lost son.

That son that has been abandoned in Egypt is now being returned to the land and at the very end of the story of the exodus when things have reached their rest when the land has been settled in the book of Joshua we see Joseph's bones turn up again.

[17 : 48] This is no accident. This is what is set up at the end of the book of Genesis and it completes so many of the themes that we have seen in the book to this point. A question to consider.

One feature of the end of Joshua that might be interesting is the fact that Joshua dies at 110 years old the same age that Joseph dies at.

Is there some parallel between those two characters? It's a question worth asking. We might also think of parallels between Joseph and other characters such as David. We have also discussed the parallels between Joseph and Jesus at various points.

What can we see in the character of Joseph that is played out in future characters in biblical history?■■■■■