

408: Reversals and Fortunes (Old Testament Lesson 12; March 20)

In one sense, the story of Joseph of Egypt is about the success of someone who is largely a jerk who has particular skills and connections. We don't know anyone like that, right?

Also totally valid to have Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat going through your head during this episode

3/13: Genesis 37-41

3/20: Genesis 42-50, so the Joseph Novella

Discussion points:

What does it require for us to be our better selves?

Family dynamics

Intentions and outcomes and ethics "Although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result--the survival of many people (50:20)

How do we make the most of our "time in prison"?

Making the most of hard situations

Relationships and networking

Preparing for what is to come

Conclusion: Living with proper form

Genesis 37: Joseph is Jacob's annoying favorite and tells his brothers about his dreams

38: Tamar outwits Judah by questionable means after God kills her husbands

39: Joseph and Potiphar and Potiphar's wife; Joseph is jailed "whatever he did the Lord made successful" (39:23).

40: Joseph interprets dreams in prison

41: Pharaoh has dreams and learns about Joe; Joseph sets up food storage

42: Joseph's brothers beg him for food; Joseph tricks them

43: Hungry brothers have to bring Benjamin

44: Joseph sets up his brothers as thieves and scares them

45: Joseph finally admits who he is, puts all their trials in perspective

46: God confirms Jacob should go to Egypt

47: Joseph uses the famine to get control over all Egypt (for Pharaoh)

48: Jacob blesses Joseph's sons but again gives priority to the younger

49: Jacob's final testament as he blesses his children then dies

50: Joseph cares for his brothers, lives long and prospers, then dies.

You will notice a repeating theme of the trickster, of subversion, where cleverness outwits those of greater power and status. A primary reason for this theme is that Judah was the less powerful

nation as compared to the northern kingdom of Israel, and Israel in general was a minor power stuck on the highway between the superpowers of Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Reading Review

Genesis 37: Joseph is Jacob's annoying favorite and tells his brothers about his dreams
It's kind of a relief how human these Biblical characters are. Jacob clearly prefers Joseph, and makes no secret of the fact. Favorite son of his favorite wife (as the musical so hilariously emphasizes). We need to let Joseph and other scriptural characters be annoying. There is some redemption and depth in the fact that Joseph is immature and excited and annoying here, but has a more mature and grateful approach when he is older and reunited (after all the mean tricks of course). There are interesting signs of narratives being woven together in our current form of the text. From the Jewish Study Bible "Reuben and the Midianites derive from the E version of the story, and Judah and the Ishmaelites from the J version...In the story in its current form, it is unclear who is the subject of pulled in v. 28" Also "there is a certain poetic justice to the brothers' cruel deception of their father, since Jacob had used kids to deceive his own father"

38: Tamar outwits Judah by questionable means after God kills her husbands

Many levels of deception and irony, as well as dark humor. Tamar ends up being the one vindicated in the story

"She is more right than I". The theme is that the continuation of the family line is of paramount importance. Also this seems a standalone story inserted into our Joseph story

39: Joseph and Potiphar and Potiphar's wife;

I think the lesson of fidelity and acting appropriately in complex contexts is a good one to draw here

Joseph is jailed "whatever he did the Lord made successful" (39:23).

Joseph becoming trusted and "second in command" happens at several points

40: Joseph interprets dreams in prison. 40:23 The chief cupbearer forgets about Joseph for over two years, caught up in his own success

41: Pharaoh has dreams and learns about Joe; Joseph sets up food storage

Foresight and prudence helps us survive catastrophe

Joseph first plans how use the time of abundance to survive the time of famine (he doesn't suggest himself), then after Pharaoh puts him in charge, he implements the plan

Note how Joseph's clothes are changed in 37.3, 23; 39.12; 41.14

42: Joseph's brothers beg him for food; Joseph tricks them

This trick may be justified (Don't push or argue; just hold people accountable to their own behavior, invitation rather than rejection)

As the Jewish Study Bible notes, "Joseph's test requires the brothers to confront anew the factor that led them to commit their infamous crime..their imprisonment reenacts Joseph's own fate" (but a much milder version)

This whole chapter serves to demonstrate that the brothers are receiving what they gave Joseph, but in a pivoted version that benefits everyone

43: Hungry brothers have to bring Benjamin

Note that even in the midst of famine, they have not used the silver that was returned to them, but they return with more than before. Accepting fully responsibility and accountability is a vital lesson “If I am to be bereaved, I shall be bereaved” (14). Jacob uses the ancient term “El Shaddai (oddly has the root of breasts, Hebrew “Shad”? We translate it “All powerful” but it could mean the “many breasted god(dess) or something similar)

“Once again, Jacob’s beloved son is being brought to Egypt--only this time with his father’s knowledge and consent and as a sign (unknown to all but Joseph) of healing rather than estrangement.” Jacob’s beloved sons are key to this narrative. Joseph is mistreated in a way that saves everyone, and Benjamin is the one who facilitates reconciliation.

This story is brilliantly told, and I highly encourage you to read it in a modern translation to feel its power:

²⁹ And he lifted up his eyes and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother’s son, and said, “Is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me? God be gracious to you, my son!” ³⁰ Then Joseph hurried out, for his compassion grew warm for his brother, and he sought a place to weep. And he entered his chamber and wept there. ³¹ Then he washed his face and came out. And controlling himself he said, “Serve the food.”

44: Joseph sets up his brothers as thieves and scares them

Joseph keeps raising the stakes, functionally to push his brothers to accept accountability “Will the older ten brothers jettison Benjamin when his presence becomes inconvenient, as they once did Joseph, or have they finally learned the painful lesson about family solidarity and filial obedience?” (Jewish Study Bible notes)

45: Joseph finally admits who he is, puts all their trials in perspective

⁴ So Joseph said to his brothers, “Come near to me, please.” And they came near. And he said, “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. ⁶ For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. ⁷ And 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. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

46: God confirms Jacob should go to Egypt

47: Joseph uses the famine to get control over all Egypt (for Pharaoh)

48: Jacob blesses Joseph’s sons but again gives priority to the younger

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Discussion

Family dynamics (intergenerational, but especially estrangement and reconciliation over a lifetime)

Intentions and outcomes and ethics “Although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result--the survival of many people (50:20)

How do we make the most of our “time in prison”? The Bible doesn’t say how long Joseph was in prison, but it was years

Making the most of hard situations

Relationships and networking

Preparing for what is to come (Develop habits and preparation where we live in a way where we will be ok for at least a while as things get hard; that's the vision of food storage)

Makes me think of one of my favorite passages in Luke 14, where Jesus urges us to make sure we have enough resources before making plans (tower and war).

Conclusion: Living with proper form

We are as good as we are incentivized and empowered to be

We should opt into the minimal level of structure needed to be our better selves

Discern, motivate, empower

Fun bonus story: Joseph and Asenath

<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/asenath-bible>

Genre of Hellenistic Romances, with the added element of Asenath's conversion to Judaism