

GENESIS

A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY

THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB

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A KINGDOM FOR THE SON (*GENESIS 41*)

There are times in Scripture when themes are repeated, for one reason or another. This chapter is one of those times.

The problem about interpreting Genesis is that we often move so closely into the details that we fail to see the bigger picture. This is why we don't see the correspondence between this story and others in the Bible. We also keep forgetting that Genesis is about the Covenant with Abraham and his descendants. Everything that happens in the story line is advancing that concept. Each major character brings out a necessary theological part of the foundation of that Covenant. We therefore must not become bogged down in the historical details, or in the biographical details, and especially not with possible moralisms that we use to judge how well the characters are performing (according to *our* standards!).

The parallel between Genesis 1 and this chapter is so powerful, it's so forceful, that it's easy to miss. But if we keep in mind that God is the principal actor in all these stories, and the Covenant is the point, then it becomes clear that the Father is creating a special Creation for his Son to rule over – just as God did with Adam in the beginning. Both aspects – the kind of world that God is creating, and the Son he prepared to rule over it – show the wisdom and power of God conforming and coordinating all things to his perfect will. And of course it's not just for the physical comforts of his people; the point is their spiritual survival and prosperity, and his glory.

The time has come to wrap up the Project and show how the Abrahamic Covenant made secure.

Pharaoh's dreams – If Joseph had gone to Pharaoh on his own to warn him about the upcoming climate crisis, he wouldn't have gotten past the secretary at the front desk. Pharaoh would only be impressed if the news came by way of connections of state. In this case, it was the King of kings speaking to Pharaoh. God used the kind of communication that would seize the king's interest – a warning of a national crisis – and make him search for an answer. It got into Pharaoh's mind, frightened him with an unearthly, eerie dread, and then left him helplessly perplexed and desperate for an answer. Only God can reach into a man's mind, stir the passions, alarm the soul, and put circumstances in their due proportion. Being in God's presence leaves an indelible impression that no power on earth can imitate.

And when God addressed the king himself, that made the issue top national priority.

By making Pharaoh dream it, it became his "property", so to speak. He couldn't set it aside, because it seemed important enough to affect his throne – and yet he didn't know the meaning of it, which added to its dread and alarm. Whatever Pharaoh dreamed became a matter of state, which we can see as he assembled all his officials, magicians and wise men to help him interpret it. So the country's affairs came to a standstill while Pharaoh searched for an answer.

Testimony about Joseph – Evidently Pharaoh's alarm and stress spilled over into the court as the affairs of his kingdom suddenly paused while

searching for an answer that would satisfy the king. The cupbearer in particular would have been privy to the king's affairs, since he was always on hand for his service, and often the king would ask his opinion. Cupbearers often became confidants to royalty because of the trust involved.

The dreams triggered the memory in the cupbearer's mind, as he remembered his own deliverance due to dreams.¹ But what made his statement to Pharaoh more poignant was that he *testified* to Joseph's abilities; he was an eyewitness to Joseph's skill at interpreting dreams. He knew by personal experience that, unlike the wise men, here was a man who could do what was required. No doubt that testimony from a doomed-man-delivered made a stronger impression on Pharaoh. Success speaks for itself. God usually uses a witness to prove his existence and his works, because people wouldn't believe it otherwise. So, based on this testimony and ignoring the potential gossip that he was going to turn to a state prisoner for help, Pharaoh ordered Joseph released and brought to him immediately.

Changed into an Egyptian – When Pharaoh commands, people *move*. The text says that “Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they quickly brought him out of the pit.” (verse 14)

¹ Personally, if I had been Joseph, as soon as I ascended to power in Egypt, the first act of state I would have carried out would have been to hang the cupbearer! Joseph asked him particularly to *remember* him when he was released, and yet the cupbearer *forgot* Joseph for the next two years! I would imagine that the cupbearer never felt exactly safe in the presence of the second-in-command of the nation. (Psalm 2:11-12)

The first thing they had to do, however, was to make him presentable to Pharaoh. Evidently he still looked like a Hebrew. He had to shave his beard and change his clothes. If you've ever seen pictures of the Egyptians, they certainly looked completely different from the Semites. They wore much less clothing, and they evidently tended to be clean-shaven.

This was the first step in Joseph's transformation from the son of Jacob into a true Egyptian. He was entering a new world, he was taking on a new life. He left his old life behind (not by his own choice, but he was forced to by circumstances) and assumed his place as a bona-fide citizen of Egypt – in fact, as an official in Egypt. He assumed Egypt's culture; he spoke their language; he learned their laws; he married an Egyptian; he ate their food and shared in their social life. He changed so completely that later on his family couldn't recognize him at all.

This perhaps is disturbing to those who want to see Abraham's descendants remain faithful to the old culture that God gave their forefather. But that misses the point: for what God had planned for the Family, there had to be someone who was thoroughly rooted in this new world who could help them survive *there*. It's not just history, it's theology driving historical events. The Heir was the first of the Family to cross the line into God's new Creation; and through his own new life, he brought the rest in with him. It couldn't work otherwise. The “old man” is dead; the “new man” gives life from his new position of power.

The Prophet –In this fallen world, man is no longer in touch with his Creator. The Creation Categories that God used

to make a world that was open to man on all levels are like locked doors now; not only that, man has lost the character of God's Perfect Son, so he can't walk with God even if he did see an open door to Heaven. All this means that failure, misery and death are certain to us all now. The doors to God are closed.

So a Prophet of God has a unique role. God on occasion provided a Prophet who would be an open door of revelation from God to man. Those moments were rare, and they usually meant that God in his mercy was extending forgiveness and another chance to otherwise rebellious sinners. But the door wouldn't be open forever. The Prophet's words were a "one-time-only deal," and if people made the mistake of ignoring or rejecting the Prophet, the door would close and they would get what they deserved, not what God in mercy was offering them.

In this case, God was offering Pharaoh and Egypt a deliverance from famine and disaster. Fortunately everyone realized what an opportunity this was, and how important Joseph seemed to be in God's hands. They wouldn't have had to; they could have put him back in prison and called him insane. But it helps when leaders see the light because then the entire country usually follows his lead willingly.

Joseph never took credit for himself. Dreams came from God; interpretations of those dreams also came from God. God was about to change his Creation in a drastic way, and God was warning Egypt to submit and obey. Joseph was only the spokesman of God and he never let Pharaoh forget that. But that also made him crucial to Pharaoh and Egypt for their survival – they needed that

contact with the Creator who was rearranging their country so drastically.

The Works of the Creator – As is true with most of the stories in Genesis, our tendency is to focus on the human actors instead of on God. Usually teachers expound on Joseph being faithful, being lifted to power, being made second in command to Pharaoh – and then they try to find a correspondence between the Joseph-Pharaoh relationship and the Christ-Father relationship. That interpretation, however, misses the theological point of what was happening here.

There are three verses that tell us who the principal actor was in this story. What was about to happen in Egypt has nothing to do with the normal forces of nature, or the natural workings of history, or even the will of Pharaoh, and certainly not morals. God was stepping into the picture and forcing events to conform to *his* plan – quite without the help or wisdom of Pharaoh and his counselors.

God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. (verse 25)

It is as I told Pharaoh; God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do. (verse 28)

And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about. (verse 32)

What God was about to do was something that only the Creator can do. Egypt isn't the land of rainfall; that's not how their agriculture works. The River Nile is their source of life (although rainfall in central Africa *is* the source for that river). So if God dries up the river, and wells alongside the river dry up as a result, and everything green dries up,

Egypt goes into a crisis that can't be solved. The Creator, of course, can do that to them.

First things first, however. The River Nile will provide abundant water and fill the wells for seven years, and the crops will produce abundant grain, as the Creator puts his own hand of life on all their efforts. Nothing will go wrong, everyone will prosper. That will be the time to collect the abundance produced during seven amazingly fruitful years.

But prosperity, by the will of the Creator, would abruptly stop after seven years and the water would dry up. We have to appreciate the fact that this timetable isn't an act of nature, because nature doesn't know the sequence of events that are necessary to bring about the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant.

During the following seven years, nothing the Egyptians do will work or prosper. The river will dry up, the wells will dry up, the crops will disappear, seed won't germinate, the climate will become desert-like – and this condition will last, again, for seven years only – the time that the Creator set for it.

The Creator was setting physical conditions to conform exactly to his spiritual timetable. The Egyptians didn't know what was going on, but Joseph and his Family would come to appreciate the fact after it all happened. It was as much an act of God as all the other miraculous events that God did for the sake of his people in Biblical history.

A Kingdom for the Son – What God was doing here was working both ends at the same time: first, he created special conditions in Egypt that nobody was equal to handling. Then he brought out of prison a person specially trained to

handle these very circumstances. It became immediately apparent that God had planned this all along, and even Pharaoh realized that now was not the time to stand on ceremony – Joseph must be recruited for the job at any cost, even to the point of relinquishing his own power.

The special conditions of this crisis served to bring out the perfections of the son. Joseph knew God's mind; he was Egypt's only contact with the Creator who was about to bring this crisis upon them. Joseph had the wisdom to recognize what was going on and how to deal with it. He was obviously God's favorite. As the crisis unfolded, he could rule effectively in Pharaoh's name and bring the entire nation in subjection to the throne. All the perfect characteristics of God's son came out shining in Joseph as he rose to the challenge and successfully dealt with the problem, to everyone's satisfaction.

There are many people in power in this world who shouldn't be in power. They came by their positions by deceit or bribery, and they make a show of running things when actually, upon close inspection, they are in no way equal to the task – or worse, they're making the situation deteriorate rapidly. It's a rare event when history brings out a person who is perfect for the crisis at hand. Circumstances prove their worth, as they solve problems and steer the state into success, peace and prosperity.

In Joseph's case, not only was it going to turn out well for Egypt, but also the Family of Abraham would be firmly established as a Nation. Any other person would have laid a defective foundation and there would have been no Israel in 400 years; with Joseph, however, events and circumstances and

people would be exactly where God wanted them when Moses arrived for the next step of their history.

Joseph the real ruler – Evidently Pharaoh understood the seriousness of the situation: he turned the entire country over to Joseph to manage as he saw fit. That’s an extraordinary step for a king to take, especially towards a man who just a few hours previous was an unknown alien sitting in a prison!

In fact, Pharaoh became marginal in the story, standing on the sidelines while Joseph took over and ruled the country. It’s as if Egypt’s business was put on hold and the LORD’s Kingdom business now had come to the forefront. Look at how Pharaoh describes it:

Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you are. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command. (verses 39-40)

See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt. (verse 41)

I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt. (verse 44)

Pharaoh no doubt reserved his glory to himself; but at this point (even if unknown to him) the LORD’s will took over and affairs were forced to follow God’s plan, not Egypt’s. This was fitting, because the kinds of things that had to be done required a man of Joseph’s caliber, open to the wisdom and power of God; they could not be done by a pagan like Pharaoh. This wasn’t the first time that we have seen the king of Egypt being put in his place by the God of Abraham, nor would it be the last.

The sons of Joseph – At this point in time it *looked* as if Joseph himself wasn’t aware yet of the wider scope of what God was doing through him. We can assume this by the way he named his two sons:

Manasseh: “For God has made me *forget* all my hardship and all my father’s house.” (verse 51)

Ephraim: “For God has made me *fruitful* in the land of my affliction.” (verse 52)

He had no reason to think he would ever return home now; he had everything he needed and wanted in Egypt, and his presence there was crucial to the Egyptians. God “made up” all the losses to him and gave him a new life. Why would he want to go back to hardship and misunderstanding again?

This conceptual shift was necessary for Joseph because here indeed was the future for Abraham’s descendants. It was time for *all* of them to give up the land of Canaan – for the next 400 years. God shifted the center, the home, of the Family from Palestine to Goshen in Egypt. Only God had the authority to do that, of course; even Jacob couldn’t take that decision upon himself, not with the Covenant Promises always before him. But there was no denying that God was “moving the household” out of one location to another, since under Joseph there would be prosperity, escape from famine and hardship in Canaan, protection from their enemies, and the Designated Heir assigned to watch over them and provide for their every need – with Pharaoh’s blessing. In other words, to stay in Canaan would mean not only deprivation and starvation, but also rebellion against God’s will. Once the Head of the household (Joseph) died to this world and moved out to the next

world, the rest of the Family *must* follow.

Of course it was only for 400 years, during which time God intended to make changes to the neighborhood in preparation for the return of Abraham's heirs. (Genesis 15:16)

There's life in Egypt – We have to remember that, if it hadn't been for God and his faithful son, Egypt would have suffered just as severely as the rest of the region. It took foresight into the ways of the Creator to know and prepare for the crisis. Egypt, for all of its wise men, would have been just as unprepared as the rest of the nations.

Instead the impossible happened: Egypt became a source of life to the Middle East. Not because of Pharaoh, but because of Joseph. With him in power, even the surrounding nations could come to him and get relief from their crises. Yes, Pharaoh profited immensely in the end (he ended up literally possessing all the land of Egypt because of Joseph's wisdom); but nevertheless Egypt played the role of savior to the surrounding peoples. Again we see the principle that we first saw in the life of Abraham: not only do his own relatives benefit from his Covenant with God, but also anybody at all who is associated with him also benefits. Where Joseph is, there is prosperity and life; people go to him for their deliverance and safety.

The Point – When God made the world as recorded in Genesis 1, he created just the right environment, the right systems, and the right resources that Adam and Eve would need to rule their kingdom effectively and prosper. And he also made “male and female” with just the right characteristics and skills that they would need to fit in with God's Creation,

in such a way as to stay in contact with God and achieve his purposes. God designed the world and man to fit together perfectly – as long as man stayed in touch with God.

Here in Egypt the Creator was doing the very same thing. He stepped into Egypt's affairs and deliberately brought about a certain sequence of events, and particular circumstances, to suit his long-range purposes. Pharaoh wasn't in charge of his own kingdom; God the Creator was. The Egyptians had no idea of what was going on or why. This was solely a collaboration between God and his people; the Egyptians were only beneficiaries by association.

And then God brought in his Son – specially prepared to understand and deal with this new situation – to rule over it and bring circumstances to where God wanted them. The Son understood his Father, he knew his Father's purposes, he had the wisdom and training to do the right things at the right time to please his Father. The two of them together were working out the foundation for the Nation of Israel for the next 2000 years.

Pharaoh was king only in name, even by his own admission. “You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command.” “See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.” “I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt.” This was a critical piece of the puzzle, because Pharaoh was not in touch with God, nor did he understand the bigger picture that was being put together here. He wouldn't have appreciated the Abrahamic Covenant nor the love that God had for his people. No, we see God creating this new Kingdom for his Son

alone as Joseph took charge of Egypt, indeed of most of the Middle East, in order to successfully pull together the intricate and very spiritual work that God was doing to fulfill the Covenant Promises.

The difference is that, whereas Adam failed God the first time around, Joseph would not fail his Father this time. The Perfect Son would succeed completely – a promise that is also part of the Abrahamic Covenant (the promise of the Heir).

The parallel with Christ and his Father is obvious. What may not be so obvious until we study the details in this story is that the Father in Heaven is even now creating a new world for his eternal Son to rule over, just as God did for Joseph. The parallel is not between Joseph/Pharaoh and Jesus/God; instead Abraham's God gave Joseph the kind of situation he needed to rule, just as he is now giving his Son Jesus Christ a "new Heavens and earth" to rule over. It requires the hand of the Creator; man can't do this. Pharaoh had nothing to do with this situation.

And just as Joseph was exactly the right son to rule over the situation in Egypt, Jesus is the Perfect Son to rule

over what God has in mind for his people. Nobody else is remotely qualified.

We see, then, where the entire book of Genesis has been leading us: the situation that God set up in the beginning (Genesis 1) is duplicated in the story of Joseph. This time, however, the Son made in God's image would rule over God's Creation as the Father wanted to see. The Covenant with Abraham was essentially that God is going to make a new world, and make a new Son, to replace the first Creation. In other words, the story of the Covenant climaxes in Joseph. Put all the principles together that we learned of the Covenant (through the lives of all four men: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph) and now we have the theological explanation of what Jesus Christ is doing in his new Kingdom.

Now we can sum up the central message of Genesis:

A perfect Son for a new Creation

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