

E100 Block 3.1 Story of Joseph B&G Feb 2011 Genesis 37:1 -- 11; Romans 8: 26 -- 28

Introduction - in the previous block we read of Abraham, his son Isaac, and his son Jacob. Great stories though dubious morality.
So... God works with imperfect people -- thank goodness.
All through the stories runs that promise -- that covenant that God made, -- that he would make of Abraham's descendants a great people who will be a blessing to all the world.

In the third block of five readings we learn about Jacob's favourite son -- Joseph

We all know the story of Joseph thanks to Andrew Lloyd Webber
Yes it is that Joseph -- the one with the Technicolor Dreamcoat.

The story of an annoying child who was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers but who rose to become Pharaoh's right-hand man and who eventually saves his brothers and his father Jacob when their family is threatened by famine.

It seems disproportionate of the E100 scheme to give so much to one story. 1/20
But the Bible itself gives Joseph a lot of "airtime"
Why? What's so important about this one man that he should get 14 chapters in Genesis devoted to the ups and downs of his life?

The story of Joseph forms an important bridge between the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) and Moses. Most people know the story of how Moses confronted Pharaoh and commanded him to "let my people go". But the story of Joseph shows us how and why the people of Israel got to Egypt in the first place.

The Joseph story is the next chapter in the big story of the Bible, -- in the unfolding of God's plan of salvation for all mankind.

Years earlier God had told Abraham that his family would become a great nation and would be a blessing to the whole world.

But at the beginning of the Joseph story, Abraham's descendants are just a motley bunch of nomadic wanderers -- with a history of family problems. !
But by the time these people leave Egypt they are great nation in the making.
Egypt will act as an incubator for a nation. The story of Joseph relates how Israel came to Egypt, where the little family multiplied to the hundreds of thousands needed to establish a nation

Egypt-- what was it like at this time.

During the Middle Kingdom period when Joseph went to Egypt, it was a powerful and unified land; a land of peace, effective government, and general prosperity. Massive mud forts guarded frontiers and Egypt's trade and gold mining interests.

It was a confident, powerful people who welcomed the little Hebrew family to Egypt, their haven of safety.

Historicity - Now, from a literary point of view, the Joseph story is distinctively different from the stories you will (may) have been reading about Abraham Isaac and Jacob. They are characterised by being a collection of old tribal tales pulled together into one document by an editor (ascribe the prophet Moses and God). Now the Joseph story is more or less one complete sophisticated narrative -- and as we shall see, the activity of God described here is different to the earlier stories.

As a historical record, the portrait given in Genesis of life in Egypt at that period has been demonstrated to be amazingly accurate.

Details in the story match well with what we know from archaeological sources about Egyptian practices and customs of that period.

E.g. . The titles, "chief of the butlers," and "chief of the bakers," occur both in Genesis (Genesis 40:2) and extant Egyptian texts.

Indication is made on the Rosetta Stone that the Pharaoh had a custom of releasing prisoners on his birthday, as he did the butler (Genesis 40:20). Pharaoh gave Joseph a signet ring, linen clothing, and a gold chain (Genesis 41:42), all three of which are mentioned in Egyptian texts for similar use.

Why Egypt? - Why was Egypt part of God's plan for His people? Why did God put Abraham etc in the promised land of Canaan and then take them out of it?

1. Egypt was a country in which Jacob's descendants would have to remain a separate people, for Jacob and his sons were shepherds, and shepherds were an abomination to the Egyptians.

The fact would remain a natural barrier to intermarriage. In Canaan there had already been some intermarriage with the inhabitants and continued living there would have brought more.

This could only have led to serious amalgamation with these Canaanites (and their religions and morality), rather than distinctiveness as a nation.

2. Egypt afforded excellent living conditions for the necessary rapid growth in numbers. The land of Goshen was fertile and regularly watered by the flooding Nile for adequate food supply.

3. During the centuries that the Jews were in Egypt, Canaan was a highway for the armies of nations to the north and south -- it was an unsafe place. The Hebrews could hardly have grown in such numbers as they did in the protected environment of Egypt.

In a very real sense, Egypt was a womb in which the seed of Israel grew and multiplied until in God's own time a nation was born.

The Primary Message

Joseph himself summed it up as he reassured his brothers at the end of the story: (45:7 -- 8) *"God sent me on ahead of you to keep your families alive and to save you in this wonderful way. After all, you weren't really the ones who sent me here -- it was God."*

What is the message? God is in control of every day circumstances. God works -- and call it providence if you want a soft word, or predestination if you want a harder one, God works in ordinary everyday ways in this world to accomplish His good purposes.

Joseph learnt this.

So far in Genesis we've seen God act in direct interventions. -- Acting clearly in supernatural ways -- setting aside the normal processes of nature -- and speaking to people directly.

But there is no record that God spoke directly to Joseph. Joseph had heard stories of the covenant promises from his father. Joseph had dreamed dreams.

But God did not meet with Joseph or confront him.

And there is no record of God acting to set aside natural processes on Joseph's account.

God blessed Joseph's efforts in Potiphar's house, in prison, and in his position as a ruler of Egypt. But it was through Joseph's own honesty and efforts that the Lord worked.

In the unfolding of circumstances, Joseph saw the hand of God. But others would have explained it as luck—both good and bad.

As we trace through the rest of the Old Testament, we'll see that God does sometimes intervene directly.

But in most cases God works through the ordering of circumstances: through the natural progress of events to achieve his plan and will.

We need to see that this in our own everyday lives.

We are as important to God as Joseph.

Even if we don't have a great part to play in world history, we do have that great New Testament promise of God's control of circumstances for our benefit: -- -- Romans 8:28 -- St Paul *"we know that God is always at work for the good of everyone who loves him. They are the ones God has chosen for his purpose"*

Even tragedies such as Joseph experienced are meant for good. True, they may not lead us to a place of blessing in some earthly Egypt.

But one day ... The pattern of our individual lives will be seen, woven into the great tapestry of the overall plan of our God: a plan that has in sharp focus the preservation of human beings for a life that extends far beyond the short span allotted you and me on earth.
