

JACOB AND HIS SONS IN EGYPT
including THE JOSEPH STORY
GENESIS 37-50

Introduction to Genesis 37-50

The authors of Genesis continue the story of Jacob, telling how he and his sons came to Egypt, and setting the scene for the story of Moses. As with the earlier sections, they incorporate into their narrative stories that have come down through the tradition. What sets this section apart from the previous two sections of the patriarchal narrative is that the authors also incorporate a separate literary composition focusing on Joseph. The 'Joseph Story' is not a compilation of separate stories. Rather it is a unified literary production, unlike anything we have met so far in the patriarchal narrative.

There is as yet no consensus among scholars as to when the Joseph Story was composed. It seems to arise out of and be directed to a community that is concerned with ongoing struggles within the 'family', and with public, political concerns; a community in which God's action is hidden. It is a story that urges the community to hold on to the 'dream', assuring them that it will come true, against the odds. It explores the question: should one brother rule over others?(see 37:8). The focus on Joseph points to the northern kingdom. Egypt is presented in very positive light. Does this indicate that at the time of writing the author was looking to Egypt to come to Israel's rescue against Assyria? The questions that are explored in the Joseph story were ones also being asked during the exile when the inclination was to blame the monarchy for the collapse of Jerusalem and so for the exile. Right government is a matter than concerns us all.

This commentary will be working on the assumption that, as with the rest of Genesis, the authors of Genesis 36 to 50 belong to the post-exilic period, and that they are inserting into their work material they inherited from various sources.

The authors, having given the genealogy of Esau (Genesis 36), focus again on Jacob. Esau moved to Edom and that is where his descendants live. Jacob settled in Canaan ‘where his father had lived as an alien’ (37:1; see Isaac’s words to him, 28:4). In 36:1, *tôl’dôt* was translated ‘descendants’. Here in 37:2 it is translated ‘story of the family’. The meaning is the same, except that here the authors cut the genealogy short to insert the Joseph Story.

Joseph is seventeen. His ten brothers are adults (Benjamin plays no part in the story). The young boy brings a bad report to his father about the sons of the two maids.

Instead of the usual ‘Jacob’, the text sometimes uses ‘Israel’ (37:3, in accordance with 32:28 and 35:10). When it does so we tend to think of him in his role as the ancestor of the twelve tribes. We learn that Israel has a special love for Joseph, and that he demonstrates this love by giving Joseph a garment that distinguishes him from his brothers. Not surprisingly this causes bad feeling in the family, and the brothers, since they cannot really speak out against the father, turn against Joseph. Peace (*šālôm*) is broken.

Then comes the dream, which sets up the plot for the Joseph Story. Joseph is full of his dream and too immature to realise that his brothers may not share his enchantment. In any case he blurts it out. God is not mentioned but everyone reading the story knows that YHWH is behind this, and we are left wondering what is God’s purpose.

The brothers’ question is significant. It recurs in the history of Israel: ‘Should one brother lord it over the others?’ This is a question about kingship. It is the first time we have met the verb ‘reign’ (*mālak*), and the first time ‘rule’ (*māšal*) has been used of political power. The question goes beyond proper order in a family to the validity of the institution of kingship itself in Israel – a question that was never satisfactorily settled.

¹Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. ²This is the story of the family of Jacob.

Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father’s wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father.

³Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. ⁴But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

⁵Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. ⁶He said to them, “Listen to this dream that I dreamed. ⁷There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf.”

⁸His brothers said to him, “Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?” So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words.

⁹He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, "Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me."

¹⁰But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, "What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?" ¹¹So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

¹²Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. ¹³And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am."

¹⁴So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron. He came to Shechem,

¹⁵and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?"

¹⁶"I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock."

¹⁷The man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan.

Joseph blurts out his second dream, clearly unaware of the feelings he is arousing in his brothers. His father rebukes him, but his father knows the importance of dreams (see 28:12), and so 'kept the matter in mind'(37:11). We think of Mary pondering the words of the shepherds in relation to her son (Luke 2:19).

Mentioning the 'mother' here is unexpected, since Rachel is already dead (35:19).

Verse twelve could easily follow straight on from verse four – which highlights even more the significance for the story of Joseph's dreams (verses five to eleven). Israel (37:13, see 37:3) sends his favourite son to see 'if it is well' with his brothers. He is asking about their *šālôm* – a word that reminds us that *šālôm* has already been broken (37:4). The family have settled in Hebron (35:27). Shechem is 60 km north of Hebron (making no allowance for turns in the road and for the mountainous terrain). This is where Jacob bought a plot of land (33:18-19).

Dothan is a further 12 km north of Shechem. Joseph is well away from his father (and his father's authority), and we wonder how his envious brothers will welcome him.

To kill the dream, the brothers determine to kill the dreamer.

Reuben is the eldest brother and so is responsible for whatever happens. It will be for him to explain everything to the father on their return. He is against killing Joseph. His words recall God's words to Noah:

Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind.

– Genesis 9:6

He suggests that they throw Joseph into a dry cistern. He is buying time to find a way to save his life. They sit down to eat (37:25).

Suddenly Judah becomes the key figure, and he persuades the others (in the absence of Reuben as becomes obvious in verse 29) to not kill Joseph, but to sell him into slavery. The brothers think this is a good idea and carry out the plan.

The Ishmaelites (37:25) are the descendants of Ishmael in Arabia (see Genesis 25:12ff). Gilead (37:25) has appeared only in the story of the encounter between Jacob and his uncle, Laban (Genesis 31:21-25). It is on the east side of the Jordan River. Gum, balm and resin were traded for medical and cosmetic purposes. The word Midianite (37:28) may refer to a geographical region rather than an ethnic group.

Reuben discovers the empty cistern and is desperate. What is he going to say to their father?

¹⁸They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. ¹⁹They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer.

²⁰Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams."

²¹But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." ²²Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him"—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father.

²³So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; ²⁴and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. ²⁵Then they sat down to eat;

and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. ²⁶Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? ²⁷Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers agreed.

²⁸When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

²⁹When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes. ³⁰He returned to his brothers, and said, "The boy is gone; and I, where can I turn?"

Jacob grieves for his son

³¹Then they took Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. ³²They had the long robe with sleeves taken to their father, and they said, "This we have found; see now whether it is your son's robe or not." ³³He recognized it, and said, "It is my son's robe! A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces."

³⁴Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. ³⁵All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning." Thus his father bewailed him.

³⁶Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard.

The tragedy unfolds. The robe, which was a sign of the father's special love, and the focus of the hatred and envy in the family, becomes the sign to the father of his son's tragic death. The father's gift comes back to haunt him.

His lament is poignant in its own terms within the story. Are there other levels of meaning here? Did the story carry some of the lamenting that swept Israel when Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom in the heart of the Joseph tribe was destroyed in 721BC by the Assyrian army?

Did it also pick up some of the lament at the destruction of Jerusalem in 587BC?

The city weeps bitterly in the night.

– Lamentations 1:2

The returned exiles had been encouraged by the following words:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.

– Isaiah 40:1 (see 66:13-14)

Will there be any comfort here? Will Israel hear words like those spoken by Jesus on the night when he, too, was handed over?

Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy.

– John 16:20

For the first time we hear of Sheol, the mythical name for the place of the dead. The father is inconsolable. He feels that he will carry a broken heart to the grave.

The scene ends unexpectedly. It doesn't seem to carry any hope, but at least we know that the dreamer is still alive, and a slave to a man with an important post in the great empire of Egypt.

This is an old family story that has come down in the oral tradition of the Judah tribe. It is included here for it concerns the next generation after Jacob, and specifically Judah. The first eleven verses introduce the two main characters of the story: Judah himself (38:1-5), and his daughter-in-law, Tamar (38:6-11).

Adullam is 16km northeast of Hebron in the hill country of Judah. The story is old for there is no criticism of Judah for marrying a Canaanite woman, such as we would expect from Genesis 24:3. Judah's three sons are named.

Tamar ('date palm') is married to Judah's eldest son, Er. He dies prematurely, and, according to the primitive conception of the time, this must have been willed by YHWH and so must be a punishment for some wrong that Er had done. (We discussed this assumption briefly in the Introduction, pages 28-30)

According to a family custom of the time, a childless widow had a right to a child, and so the brother of her deceased husband had an obligation to ensure this. There is no question in this ancient story of a right to marriage, though that right was incorporated later into law (see Deuteronomy 25:5-10). It is termed 'levirate law' after the Latin 'levir' which translates the Hebrew word for 'brother of a married man'.

Onan refuses to fulfil his obligation to her. As was the case with his older brother (38:7), his premature death is seen as divine punishment for this refusal. The story shows no interest in the rights or wrongs of spilling seed.

Judah has only one son left, Shelah, and he does not want to risk his life, so he focuses on his youth and persuades Tamar to go back and live with her father 'until my son Shelah grows up'.

¹It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and settled near a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah.

²There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua; he married her and went in to her. ³She conceived and bore a son; and he named him Er. ⁴Again she conceived and bore a son whom she named Onan. ⁵Yet again she bore a son, and she named him Shelah. She was in Chezib when she bore him.

⁶Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn; her name was Tamar.

⁷But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of YHWH and YHWH put him to death.

⁸Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her; raise up offspring for your brother." ⁹But since Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, he spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went in to his brother's wife, so that he would not give offspring to his brother. ¹⁰What he did was displeasing in the sight of YHWH, and he put him to death also.

¹¹Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Remain a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up"—for he feared that he too would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went to live in her father's house.

12In course of time the wife of Judah, Shua's daughter, died; when Judah's time of mourning was over, he went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite.

13When Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep,"

14she put off her widow's garments, put on a veil, wrapped herself up, and sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. She saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him in marriage.

15When Judah saw her, he thought her to be a prostitute, for she had covered her face.

16He went over to her at the road side, and said, "Come, let me come in to you," for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?" **17**He answered, "I will send you a kid from the flock." And she said, "Only if you give me a pledge, until you send it." **18**He said, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your signet and your cord, and the staff that is in your hand." So he gave them to her, and went in to her, and she conceived by him. **19**Then she got up and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood.

20When Judah sent the kid by his friend the Adullamite, to recover the pledge from the woman, he could not find her. **21**He asked the townspeople, "Where is the temple prostitute who was at Enaim by the wayside?" But they said, "No prostitute has been here."

22So he returned to Judah, and said, "I have not found her; moreover the townspeople said, 'No prostitute has been here.'"

23Judah replied, "Let her keep the things as her own, otherwise we will be laughed at; you see, I sent this kid, and you could not find her."

Judah's wife dies. Judah decides to go to Timnah, seven km north-east of Adullam, to check on his sheep. Tamar hears he is coming and knows that he is not fulfilling his obligation to her. Determined to get her rights, she pretends to be a prostitute. In doing so she is risking her life, as having sexual relations while betrothed to Shelah was considered adultery (acting against the rights of her betrothed), and was punishable by death.

Having sexual relations with a daughter-in-law is forbidden (Leviticus 18:15), but he did not know the prostitute was Tamar. His behaviour will be criticised shortly, but not because he has offended against sexual mores. The story says nothing against Judah's going with a prostitute.

She considers her right to a child to be more important and takes the risk. However, she does her best to protect herself by tricking Judah into leaving her his signet ring (used to sign contracts, and so traceable to him), the cord that hung around his neck and to which the ring was attached, and his staff, with identifying markings carved on it.

Judah follows up on his pledge. What he left with her is important to him, but the story focuses on his keeping his pledge. She was not to be found, and he did not want to go public. People would laugh at his having been duped. So he puts it down to experience and the matter ends there. Or does it?

If it were not for verse 26, we would be forgiven for thinking that the narrative was a typical display of conventional double standard morality. There is no condemnation of the man involved. As to the woman, the deception, the illicit sex and the prospect of damaging Judah's 'good name' are passed over. Her crime is that she has committed adultery, and Judah has not the slightest compunction in ordering that she suffer the consequences. In the story, this meant being burned to death (38:24). Later the punishment will be stoning (see Deuteronomy 22:23-24). This later law applies if she is 'already engaged to be married'. It is not the sex that is the problem, it is the fact that a man's rights over his betrothed have been violated. Both the man and the woman involved are to be punished. If he is married and she is not, there is no law saying that he should be punished for violating his wife's rights. She has none.

Verse 36 opens up a more subtle moral estimation. Judah admits that his failure to give her her rights is of more significance than her crime. In looking after his own private interests, he had failed to carry out his obligations to the community and to a defenceless, childless widow. Her behaviour is not condoned, but it is certainly portrayed as the lesser of two evils. The story is a critique of the sanctioning of oppression in the name of custom and propriety.

We might also reflect on the fact that Tamar is praised in the Book of Ruth (4:12) for her persistence in getting her rights. David was a fruit of her action, and she is named in Jesus' genealogy (Matthew 1:3).

Judah is again portrayed as a just man. He has no further sexual relations with Tamar. (38:26) That would have been incest.

Zerah is mentioned again in genealogies (see Genesis 46:12, Numbers 26:20-21, and Joshua 7:18). The focus of interest, however, is the firstborn of Tamar's twins, Perez (from pāraz, 'to breach/break through'). King David is among his descendants.

24 About three months later Judah was told, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the whore; moreover she is pregnant as a result of whoredom." And Judah said, "Bring her out, and let her be burned." **25** As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, "It was the owner of these who made me pregnant." And she said, "Take note, please, whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff."

26 Then Judah acknowledged them and said, "She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not lie with her again.

27 When the time of her delivery came, there were twins in her womb. **28** While she was in labour, one put out a hand; and the midwife took and bound on his hand a crimson thread, saying, "This one came out first."

29 But just then he drew back his hand, and out came his brother; and she said, "What a breach you have made for yourself!" Therefore he was named Perez.

30 Afterward his brother came out with the crimson thread on his hand; and he was named Zerah.

Egypt is blessed through Joseph

¹Now Joseph was taken down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there.

²YHWH was with Joseph, and he became a successful man; he was in the house of his Egyptian master. ³His master saw that YHWH was with him, and that YHWH caused all that he did to prosper in his hands. ⁴So Joseph found favour in his sight and attended him; he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had.

⁵From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, YHWH blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of YHWH was on all that he had, in house and field. ⁶So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge; and, with him there, he had no concern for anything but *his own private affairs*.

Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking. ⁷And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." ⁸But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Look, with me here, my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand. ⁹He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" ¹⁰And although she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not consent to lie beside her or to be with her.

Verse 1 repeats 37:28 and 37:36. We are back with the Joseph Story and chapter 39 is the first of three chapters in which we watch what happens to Joseph (to the dream) in Egypt.

The key is in the first words of verse two: 'YHWH was with Joseph' (repeated 39:23). This is what YHWH promised Jacob at Bethel (28:15). YHWH also promised Jacob: 'all the families of the earth will be blessed in you and in your offspring' (28:14). Here we see Joseph's master prospering because of Joseph. First of all the master made him his personal assistant, and then put him in charge of his household, and, according to the promise, 'the blessing of YHWH was on all that he had' (39:5).

We witness here, once again, the universal view that is throughout Genesis. Joseph's master does not know YHWH but the blessing extends to him through Joseph.

However, YHWH is with Joseph and blesses him in the real situation in which Joseph finds himself; that is, amid the temptations, seduction and deceit that are part of the 'values' of the Empire. We are reminded of Jesus' prayer:

Father, I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.

– John 17:15

His master's wife, who is used to giving commands and getting what she wants, is attracted to Joseph and orders him to lie with her (39:7). He refuses. God is loyal to Joseph. Joseph must be loyal to his master. To betray trust and to commit adultery is 'great wickedness and sin against God' (39:10; see Deuteronomy 22:22). She persists, and so does Joseph.

This is not the first time that a garment belonging to Joseph has been used to deceive (see 37:32), nor is the first time that the innocent Joseph has been in the hands ('power') of those who would destroy him. Before it was envious brothers. Here it is a scorned woman.

She has no trouble getting the rest of the household to believe her, appealing to race. He is an outsider, a stateless 'Hebrew'(39:14) with no rights. We haven't heard the word 'Hebrew' since the nomad Abraham was described in this way (14:13).

She tells her husband, who is angry. However, this is not straightforward. He doesn't directly accuse Joseph. Neither does he have him killed for attempted adultery. Perhaps he suspects, but does not want to know, the truth.

Joseph remains faithful, to his master, and so to YHWH. The chapter ends where it began. Once more his goodness and talent are recognised. Once more we see that 'YHWH was with Joseph'(39:21). And once more an Egyptian is blessed through Joseph: 'whatever he did, YHWH made it prosper'(39:23).

Joseph (like all of us) has to live his faithfulness and receive YHWH's blessing in the real world, which works from different 'values'.

¹¹One day, however, when he went into the house to do his work, and while no one else was in the house, ¹²she caught hold of his garment, saying, "Lie with me!" But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside. ¹³When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled outside, ¹⁴she called out to the members of her household and said to them, "See, my husband has brought among us a Hebrew to insult us! He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice; ¹⁵and when he heard me raise my voice and cry out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside."

¹⁶Then she kept his garment by her until his master came home, ¹⁷and she told him the same story, saying, "The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to *enjoy* me; ¹⁸but as soon as I raised my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside."

¹⁹When his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, saying, "This is the way your servant treated me," he became enraged. ²⁰And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined; he remained there in prison.

²¹But YHWH was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favour in the sight of the chief jailer. ²²The chief jailer committed to Joseph's care all the prisoners who were in the prison, and whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. ²³The chief jailer paid no heed to anything that was in Joseph's care, because YHWH was with him; and whatever he did, YHWH made it prosper.

¹Some time after this, the cupbearer of the king of Egypt and his baker offended their lord the king of Egypt. ²Pharaoh was angry with his two officers, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, ³and he put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the prison where Joseph was confined. ⁴The captain of the guard charged Joseph with them, and he waited on them; and they continued for some time in custody.

⁵One night they both dreamed—the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison—each his own dream, and each dream with its own meaning.

⁶When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were troubled. ⁷So he asked Pharaoh's officers, who were with him in custody in his master's house, "Why are your faces downcast today?"

⁸They said to him, "We have had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them."

And Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them to me."

⁹So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph, and said to him, "In my dream there was a vine before me, ¹⁰and on the vine there were three branches. As soon as it budded, its blossoms came out and the clusters ripened into grapes.

¹¹Pharaoh's cup was in my hand; and I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup, and placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand."

We are still seeing how the 'dreamer' (37:19) fares in Egypt, and how the dream (37:7,9) is realised there.

Two of the Pharaoh's officers are under investigation, and find themselves in custody 'in the prison where Joseph was confined' (40:3). We have already been told that everything that happened in the prison 'was in Joseph's care, because the Lord was with him' (39:23). This includes the two men.

They each have a dream, and Joseph's simple concern encourages them to confide in him. In the court of the Pharaoh there were experts in interpreting dreams, but these are unavailable to the men under custody and they are troubled.

Joseph challenges their understanding. Interpretation of dreams is not under court control, for 'do not interpretations belong to God?' (40:8). Interpretation is a gift from God. God can give it to whomever he chooses. Perhaps even to Joseph. Joseph's insistence that God is free is subversive of political power and institutional control. Like 'prophecy' it cannot be organised. It is beyond the power of human control.

The subject of dreams points back to Joseph's dreams (37:7,9), and prepares us for the climax of chapters 39-41: the dream of the Pharaoh.

The chief cupbearer recounts his dream (40:9-11). The author of the Joseph Story is interested in it only to highlight the fact that Joseph the dreamer has been given by God the gift to interpret dreams – a gift that is beyond the power of Pharaoh to give or to take away.

The key gift given by God to Joseph is that he sees the man's innocence, and assures him that within three days Pharaoh will have made his judgment. When the cupbearer bows before Pharaoh, he will be summoned to look up and receive his judgment. He will be declared innocent.

Joseph's pitiful plea (40:14) reminds us that this is an ordinary man here whom God has chosen, a man who hopes that God will remember him as God remembered Noah (8:1), and Abraham (19:29), and Rachel (30:22). He hopes that God will remember him through the 'kindness' (hesed) of the cupbearer. His plea is that he will be 'brought out of this place' (40:14). This was the cry of the Hebrew people that God heard when he brought them out of Egypt – a cry that was echoed by the exiles in Babylon. Joseph is an innocent and suffering servant.

Joseph sees the guilt of the baker and interprets his dream accordingly (40:16-19). He would be decapitated, and his corpse exposed high on a stake. 'On the third day' (40:20; see 22:4) God reveals the truth of Joseph's interpretation.

However, 'the cupbearer did not remember Joseph' (40:23). Joseph must continue to trust that YHWH is with him (39:2), though all others forget him. He must wait on God for the fulfilling of his dream, and he must wait in a land where he has been unjustly sold into slavery, and in a prison where he has been unjustly confined. God does not promise those he blesses a life free from suffering.

12Then Joseph said to him, "This is its interpretation: the three branches are three days; **13**within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office; and you shall place Pharaoh's cup in his hand, just as you used to do when you were his cupbearer.

14But remember me when it is well with you; please do me the kindness to make mention of me to Pharaoh, and so have me brought out of this place. **15**For in fact I was stolen out of the land of the Hebrews; and here also I have done nothing that they should have put me into the dungeon."

16When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was favourable, he said to Joseph, "I also had a dream: there were three cake baskets on my head, **17**and in the uppermost basket there were all sorts of baked food for Pharaoh, but the birds were eating it out of the basket on my head."

18And Joseph answered, "This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days; **19**within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head from you and hang you on a pole; and the birds will eat the flesh from you."

20On the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, he made a feast for all his servants, and lifted up the head of the chief cupbearer and the head of the chief baker among his servants.

21He restored the chief cupbearer to his cupbearing, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand; **22**but the chief baker he hanged, just as Joseph had interpreted to them.

23Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.

¹After two whole years, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile, ²and there came up out of the Nile seven sleek and fat cows, and they grazed in the reed grass. ³Then seven other cows, ugly and thin, came up out of the Nile after them, and stood by the other cows on the bank of the Nile. ⁴The ugly and thin cows ate up the seven sleek and fat cows. And Pharaoh awoke.

⁵Then he fell asleep and dreamed a second time; seven ears of grain, plump and good, were growing on one stalk. ⁶Then seven ears, thin and blighted by the east wind, sprouted after them. ⁷The thin ears swallowed up the seven plump and full ears. Pharaoh awoke, and it was a dream.

⁸In the morning his spirit was troubled; so he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was no one who could interpret them to Pharaoh.

⁹Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, "I remember my faults today.

¹⁰Once Pharaoh was angry with his servants, and put me and the chief baker in custody in the house of the captain of the guard. ¹¹We dreamed on the same night, he and I, each having a dream with its own meaning. ¹²A young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. When we told him, he interpreted our dreams to us, giving an interpretation to each according to his dream. ¹³As he interpreted to us, so it turned out; I was restored to my office, and the baker was hanged."

¹⁴Then Pharaoh sent for Joseph

We are at the heart of the greatest empire of the ancient world, and we are at the court of its Pharaoh. He has a double dream, as did Joseph (37:5,7), and as did Pharaoh's officials (40:9-11, 16-17).

The Pharaoh is responsible for the welfare of the land. Divine blessing comes to the land and its people through him. It is expected that God would guide him, and God does, through his dreams. He is 'standing by the Nile'(41:1), the source of all Egypt's wealth, and consequently of its power. Neither cattle (41:2-4) nor agriculture (41:5-7) can survive without the waters of the Nile.

His dreams disturb him (41:8). He is accustomed to command and complete control, but he senses his helplessness. He calls on all the acquired 'wisdom' of Egypt, but it, too, is shown up as helpless. We suspect that no one wants to be the bearer of bad news to the Pharaoh.

Then, at last, Joseph is 'remembered'(see 40:23). The cupbearer recounts his experience when in custody (chapter 40), and how a young Hebrew interpreted dreams and 'as he interpreted to us, so it turned out'(41:13).

'Then Pharaoh sent for Joseph'(41:14).

We have seen Joseph prosper under the captain of the guard (39:5), only to be unjustly cast into prison (39:20). We have seen him placed in charge of the prisoners by the chief gaoler (39:22), but his plea to get out of prison (40:14) has failed to reach the Pharaoh, because he was forgotten. Now, 'after two whole years'(41:1), he is being summoned into the Pharaoh's presence. What now?

From the beginning the blessing of God to Abraham included 'in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (12:3). The most powerful ruler of the most powerful empire needs Joseph.

Joseph corrects the Pharaoh: 'It is not I; God will give Pharaoh a favourable answer' (41:16). A 'favourable' answer? Will God bless Egypt through Joseph?

Pharaoh recounts his dreams.

Joseph assures Pharaoh twice: 'God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do' (41:25,28).

Joseph interprets the dreams, and we suspect that Pharaoh knows that God is giving him the truth through Joseph. The dreams troubled him (41:8). Joseph's interpretation confirms his worst suspicions.

The question remains: How will this be 'favourable' (41:16)?

14Then Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was hurriedly brought out of the dungeon. When he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came in before Pharaoh. **15**And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it."

16Joseph answered Pharaoh, "It is not I; God will give Pharaoh a favourable answer."

17Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "In my dream I was standing on the banks of the Nile; **18**and seven cows, fat and sleek, came up out of the Nile and fed in the reed grass. **19**Then seven other cows came up after them, poor, very ugly, and thin. Never had I seen such ugly ones in all the land of Egypt. **20**The thin and ugly cows ate up the first seven fat cows, **21**but when they had eaten them no one would have known that they had done so, for they were still as ugly as before. Then I awoke. **22**I fell asleep a second time and I saw in my dream seven ears of grain, full and good, growing on one stalk, **23**and seven ears, withered, thin, and blighted by the east wind, sprouting after them; **24**and the thin ears swallowed up the seven good ears. But when I told it to the magicians, there was no one who could explain it to me."

25Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, "Pharaoh's dreams are one and the same; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do.

26The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good ears are seven years; the dreams are one. **27**The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, as are the seven empty ears blighted by the east wind. They are seven years of famine.

28It is as I told Pharaoh; God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do. **29**There will come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt. **30**After them there will arise seven years of famine, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt; the famine will consume the land. **31**The plenty will no longer be known in the land because of the famine that will follow, for it will be very grievous. **32**And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about.

Joseph becomes viceroy of Egypt

³³Now therefore let Pharaoh select a man who is discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt. ³⁴Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land, and take one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven plenteous years. ³⁵Let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming, and lay up grain under the authority of Pharaoh for food in the cities, and let them keep it. ³⁶That food shall be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine that are to befall the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish through the famine."

³⁷The proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants. ³⁸Pharaoh said to his servants, "Can we find anyone else like this—one in whom is the spirit of God?" ³⁹So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has shown you all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you.

⁴⁰You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you." ⁴¹And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt." ⁴²Removing his signet ring from his hand, Pharaoh put it on Joseph's hand; he arrayed him in garments of fine linen, and put a gold collar around his neck. ⁴³He had him ride in the chariot of his second-in-command; and they cried out in front of him, "Bow the knee!" Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt. ⁴⁴Moreover Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt."

⁴⁵Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-paneah; and he gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, as his wife. Thus Joseph gained authority over the land of Egypt.

Pharaoh knows what God will do, not because of the 'wisdom' of his court, but through Joseph:

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise;
God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.

– 1 Corinthians 1:27

Divine revelation, however, does not dispense with human practical know-how. The outcome will, indeed, be 'favourable' (41:16), but not because of Egypt's power (see Isaiah 10:13-14; Ezekiel 28:2-10). God needs leaders who are in touch with God's dream. Pharaoh must find someone 'discerning and wise' (41:33,39), who knows what to do and how to do it; and that person will need the backing of Pharaoh's authority (41:35).

Pharaoh is impressed and appoints Joseph as his viceroy (41:40). Joseph's dream (37:9) has come true!

Many Egyptian paintings illustrate the rite of investiture described in verses 42-43.

Verse 45 is of special interest. This story has no problem with Joseph receiving a new name, which puts him under the patronage of an Egyptian god, or with his marrying the daughter of an Egyptian priest of the temple of 'On' (Heliopolis, north of Cairo), which would have involved him in participating officially in the temple cult. For the author of the Joseph Story (and, indeed, for most of the stories of Genesis) there is only one God, however other nations may envisage this God and worship him. God is YHWH.

In the years of good harvests, Joseph does what he told Pharaoh needed to be done, and the blessing of God comes to Egypt through him (41:49).

As noted on the previous page, the authors have no problem with Joseph entering a 'mixed marriage'. The name of his father-in-law, Potiphera, means (in Egyptian): 'He whom the god Re [the sun god] has given'. The name of his wife, Asenath, means: 'belonging to Neit [an Egyptian goddess]'.
 Joseph names the children (they are to be brought up in *his* tradition) Manasseh (from *nāšâ*, 'to forget') and Ephraim (from *pārâ*, 'to bear fruit').

Chapters 39-41 began with Joseph as a slave in Egypt, and end with the whole world coming to him and submitting to his will. Those along the way, who tried to destroy the dream by destroying the dreamer, were the very ones who set up the circumstances for the dreamer to be able to fulfil the dream entrusted to him.

Joseph's initial dream was met by his brothers with the question: 'Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?' (37:8). The answer of these chapters is Yes, and it is good that it is so, for the rule of Joseph is saving the whole world from starvation.

For all its complications, there is a place for political power when it is at the service of the people, and when it is in accordance with the will of YHWH.

⁴⁶Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh, and went through all the land of Egypt.

⁴⁷During the seven plentiful years the earth produced abundantly. ⁴⁸He gathered up all the food of the seven years when there was plenty in the land of Egypt, and stored up food in the cities; he stored up in every city the food from the fields around it. ⁴⁹So Joseph stored up grain in such abundance—like the sand of the sea—that he stopped measuring it; it was beyond measure.

⁵⁰Before the years of famine came, Joseph had two sons, whom Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, bore to him.

⁵¹Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh, "For," he said, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house." ⁵²The second he named Ephraim, "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes."

⁵³The seven years of plenty that prevailed in the land of Egypt came to an end;

⁵⁴and the seven years of famine began to come, just as Joseph had said. There was famine in every country, but throughout the land of Egypt there was bread.

⁵⁵When all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried to Pharaoh for bread. Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph; what he says to you, do."

⁵⁶And since the famine had spread over all the land, Joseph opened all the storehouses, and sold to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe in the land of Egypt.

⁵⁷Moreover, all the world came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because the famine became severe throughout the world.

The sovereignty of God

In chapters 39-41 the Joseph Story is making a fundamental statement about power. For all their show, the institutions of the empire do not, finally, hold power. In the house of Potiphar it is the man who carries God's dream who holds the power (39:5). It is not a power that he holds of himself, and so it is vulnerable to one who would abuse her ability to exercise control. There is nothing Joseph can do to counter such abuse, but even in a prison to which he has been unjustly condemned, it is the one who carries God's dream who holds the power (39:22). He cannot extricate himself from prison. He must wait on the one whose dream he carries, but, through the vagaries of nature and of people, it is the carrier of the dream who rises to a position of ultimate power in the empire.

God's dream for the world will not be thwarted by envious brothers, by a scorned woman, or by a thoughtless and forgetful cupbearer. But God's dream requires the response of the one who carries it. Since God's dream for the world demands organisation of the world's resources, those who exercise political control have their place – and an important one – so long as they are in touch with the dream. The author of the Joseph Story is not against the monarchy. He demands only that the monarch listen to YHWH, wait on YHWH, and give his whole heart and soul to the practical tasks of government. There is a place for political power, but only if the king is attentive to YHWH's dream and not his own. If he is attentive, the people will enjoy the blessing of peace:

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of YHWH shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of YHWH.

His delight shall be in the fear of YHWH.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth ...
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of YHWH as the waters cover the sea.

– Isaiah 11:1-9

Human beings are not puppets manipulated by a controlling fate. God is not a puppeteer controlling the strings. But neither are human beings in control, able to organise the world according to their own systems and their own wisdom. God is the Creator; we are the creatures. God has a design, a dream, for the world. It needs someone to carry the dream, and it can appear that dreamers are rendered powerless by the powers of this world. But it is not so. God does not control the world, but neither is God absent or dependent on the world. God has a dream for the world, that it be blessed, and the dream will find its way and its time, through an Abraham, an Isaac, a Jacob and a Joseph, who, with all their human weaknesses, believe in the dream, commit themselves to it, and keep the dream alive.

Ultimately, it is God who reigns, so long as we do not imagine God's reign according to the principles of worldly power. For it is ultimately a reign of love, and it can only be realised by human beings who love, not by those who control. The God who revealed himself to the Isaiah School in exile could say:

Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel,
who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb;
even to your old age I am he, even when you turn gray I will carry you.
I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save.

– Isaiah 46:3-4

And God is free – free to raise up whomever he wills to be his instrument in bringing about his blessing. In the Joseph Story it is Joseph who comes to the aid of an Egypt that has experienced its powerlessness. When Israel was wasting away in exile it was the Persian king, Cyrus, who showed up the powerlessness of Babylon, and who made it possible for Israel to return to the Promised Land. The members of the Isaiah School recognise the ultimate powerlessness of Babylon, and God's providence in raising up Cyrus:

Set forth your case, says YHWH; bring your proofs, says the King of Jacob.
Let them bring them, and tell us what is to happen.
Tell us the former things, what they are, so that we may consider them,
and that we may know their outcome; or declare to us the things to come.
Tell us what is to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods;
do good, or do harm, that we may be afraid and terrified.
You, indeed, are nothing and your work is nothing at all;
whoever chooses you is an abomination.

I stirred up one from the north, and he has come,
from the rising of the sun he was summoned by name.
He shall trample on rulers as on mortar, as the potter treads clay.
Who declared it from the beginning, so that we might know,
and beforehand, so that we might say, "He is right"?
There was no one who declared it, none who proclaimed,
none who heard your words.
I first have declared it to Zion, and I give to Jerusalem a herald of good tidings.
But when I look there is no one; among these there is no counselor
who, when I ask, gives an answer. No, they are all a delusion;
their works are nothing; their images are empty wind.

– Isaiah 41:21-29

¹When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why are you fearful? ²I have heard," he said, "that there is grain in Egypt; go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die." ³So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt.

⁴But Jacob did not send Joseph's brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he feared that harm might come to him.

⁵Thus the sons of Israel were among the other people who came to buy grain, for the famine had reached the land of Canaan.

⁶Now Joseph was governor over the land; it was he who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground.

⁷When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke harshly to them. "Where do you come from?" he said. They said, "From the land of Canaan, to buy food."

⁸Although Joseph had recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. ⁹Joseph also remembered the dreams that he had dreamed about them. He said to them, "You are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land!"

¹⁰They said to him, "No, my lord; your servants have come to buy food. ¹¹We are all sons of one man; we are honest men; your servants have never been spies." ¹²But he said to them, "No, you have come to see the nakedness of the land!" ¹³They said, "We, your servants, are twelve brothers, the sons of a certain man in the land of Canaan; the youngest, however, is now with our father, and one is no more."

For three chapters we have watched Joseph's rise to power in Egypt. Chapter 41 ended with the words: 'all the world came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because the famine became severe throughout the world.' The Joseph Story now takes us back to Jacob, and we see the famine from the point of view of Jacob and his family.

Jacob instructs his sons to go to Egypt to buy grain. We know that he is still mourning for Joseph (see 37:35), because he keeps with him 'Joseph's brother Benjamin', the only remaining son of his most loved wife, Rachel. He cannot bear to lose him too.

In verse six we have the fulfilment of Joseph's dream: 'There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf'(37:7).

Joseph recognises them, though they do not recognise him. It is, after all, over thirteen years since they sold him into slavery (compare 37:2 and 41:16).

It is not immediately clear why Joseph 'treated them like strangers and spoke harshly to them'(42:7), nor why he accuses them of being spies (42:9,11). Our first impression is that Joseph is testing them to see if they have changed. He notes the absence of Benjamin and is wondering if they might have treated Benjamin as badly as they treated him. They explain that they are not a band of spies but are brothers 'come to buy food'(42:20). They also tell him that there are twelve brothers in the family, that the youngest 'is now with our father' and that one of their brothers 'is no more.'

Joseph is still testing them. If Benjamin is really with the father, this shows how special he is to him. Are they as envious of Benjamin as they were of Joseph? Or has some harm come to Benjamin from them, and they are still covering up?

He takes an oath by the life of the Pharaoh. This was a common practice in a time when the king was considered consecrated to God (see 2Samuel 15:21).

'On the third day' (42:18) signifies a significant turn in events (see 22:4). Joseph knows that the famine is real and wants to provide for his family, so he decides to keep one of them as hostage and send the others home to bring Benjamin to him. He covers up his compassion by appealing to a religious motive (42:18).

The brothers are obviously still living with the guilt of their behaviour towards Joseph, and see their plight as punishment for their crime. Reuben, the oldest, reminds them that they should have listened to him and not wronged the boy (42:22; see 37:21-22).

Joseph is clearly moved to hear that his oldest brother was not party to what happened to him. He is also moved to hear that his brothers are admitting their guilt, at least to each other. There is some hope for reconciliation. He has their bags filled with grain, and sees that their money is returned to them and that they are given provisions for the journey home.

¹⁴But Joseph said to them, "It is just as I have said to you; you are spies! ¹⁵Here is how you shall be tested: as Pharaoh lives, you shall not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here! ¹⁶Let one of you go and bring your brother, while the rest of you remain in prison, in order that your words may be tested, whether there is truth in you; or else, as Pharaoh lives, surely you are spies." ¹⁷And he put them all together in prison for three days.

¹⁸On the third day Joseph said to them, "Do this and you will live, for I fear God: ¹⁹if you are honest men, let one of your brothers stay here where you are imprisoned. The rest of you shall go and carry grain for the famine of your households, ²⁰and bring your youngest brother to me. Thus your words will be verified, and you shall not die." And they agreed to do so. ²¹They said to one another, "Alas, we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother; we saw his anguish when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen. That is why this anguish has come upon us."

²²Then Reuben answered them, "Did I not tell you not to wrong the boy? But you would not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood." ²³They did not know that Joseph understood them, since he spoke with them through an interpreter. ²⁴He turned away from them and wept; then he returned and spoke to them. And he picked out Simeon and had him bound before their eyes. ²⁵Joseph then gave orders to fill their bags with grain, to return every man's money to his sack, and to give them provisions for their journey. This was done for them. ²⁶They loaded their donkeys with their grain, and departed.

The brothers report back to Jacob

²⁷When one of them opened his sack to give his donkey fodder at the lodging place, he saw his money at the top of the sack. ²⁸He said to his brothers, "My money has been put back; here it is in my sack!" At this they lost heart and turned trembling to one another, saying, "What is this that God has done to us?"

²⁹When they came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had happened to them, saying, ³⁰"The man, the lord of the land, spoke harshly to us, and charged us with spying on the land. ³¹But we said to him, 'We are honest men, we are not spies. ³²We are twelve brothers, sons of our father; one is no more, and the youngest is now with our father in the land of Canaan.' ³³Then the man, the lord of the land, said to us, 'By this I shall know that you are honest men: leave one of your brothers with me, take grain for the famine of your households, and go your way. ³⁴Bring your youngest brother to me, and I shall know that you are not spies but honest men. Then I will release your brother to you, and you may trade in the land.'"

³⁵As they were emptying their sacks, there in each one's sack was his bag of money. When they and their father saw their bundles of money, they were dismayed. ³⁶And their father Jacob said to them, "I am the one you have bereaved of children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and now you would take Benjamin. All this has happened to me!"

³⁷Then Reuben said to his father, "You may kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you. Put him in my hands, and I will bring him back to you." ³⁸But he said, "My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he alone is left. If harm should come to him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol."

One of them discovers the money. We don't need to be told that the others immediately check as well. They have been accused of spying, now they may be accused of theft. They are living with guilt and assume that this is God's doing.

They arrive home and tell their father what has happened to them, including the 'man's' insistence that they bring Benjamin back with them (42:33).

We are told again of their dismay concerning the money, a dismay now shared by their father. Is he concerned that the brothers may have stolen it? He accuses them of being responsible for the loss of two sons, Joseph and Simeon, as well as the danger to Benjamin.

Reuben, his firstborn, cannot bear to see his father so racked with grief, and is clearly willing to do anything to reassure him and to persuade him to let them take Benjamin back with them to Egypt. Jacob refuses to let Benjamin go. His expression of grief reminds us of his initial grief at the loss of Joseph (see 37:35).

When the brothers were determined to kill Joseph, it was Reuben, the eldest son, who first tried to stop them (37:21-24), but it was Judah who actually worked out how to do it (37:26-27). We have just seen Reuben attempting to persuade Jacob to let them take Benjamin back to Egypt (42:37-38). Once again it is Judah who succeeds. From now on it will be Judah who is portrayed as the leader among the brothers.

The Joseph Story probably had its origins in the northern kingdom (Israel). Have we inherited a Judah version that puts Judah in a leading role and in such good light?

Apart from the standard formula ‘sons of Israel’ (42:5), this is the first time in the Joseph Story since chapter 37 that Jacob is called ‘Israel’ (43:6). It will happen again in 45:28, and occurs when Jacob is in relationship with his sons.

Judah wants to get things moving and takes the lead by offering himself as surety for Benjamin (43:9).

Jacob yields. If they must go, then they should load themselves up with gifts, and take back the money that was in their bags, plus whatever they need to purchase more food.

Jacob has never been one to avoid hard decisions. This must have been the hardest: ‘Take your brother’ (43:13).

¹Now the famine was severe in the land.

²And when they had eaten up the grain that they had brought from Egypt, their father said to them, “Go again, buy us a little more food.” ³But Judah said to him, “The man solemnly warned us, saying, ‘You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.’

⁴If you will send our brother with us, we will go down and buy you food; ⁵but if you will not send him, we will not go down, for the man said to us, ‘You shall not see my face, unless your brother is with you.’”

⁶Israel said, “Why did you treat me so badly as to tell the man that you had another brother?” ⁷They replied, “The man questioned us carefully about ourselves and our kindred, saying, ‘Is your father still alive? Have you another brother?’ What we told him was in answer to these questions. Could we in any way know that he would say, ‘Bring your brother down?’”

⁸Then Judah said to his father Israel, “Send the boy with me, and let us be on our way, so that we may live and not die—you and we and also our little ones. ⁹I myself will be surety for him; you can hold me accountable for him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever. ¹⁰If we had not delayed, we would now have returned twice.”

¹¹Then their father Israel said to them, “If it must be so, then do this: take some of the choice fruits of the land in your bags, and carry them down as a present to the man—a little balm and a little honey, gum, resin, pistachio nuts, and almonds. ¹²Take double the money with you. Carry back with you the money that was returned in the top of your sacks; perhaps it was an oversight. ¹³Take your brother also, and be on your way again to the man.

Second visit to Egypt

¹⁴May God Almighty grant you mercy before the man, so that he may send back your other brother and Benjamin. *But I – I am bereaved, bereaved.* ¹⁵So the men took the present, and they took double the money with them, as well as Benjamin. Then they went on their way down to Egypt, and stood before Joseph.

¹⁶When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the steward of his house, “Bring the men into the house, and slaughter an animal and make ready, for the men are to dine with me at noon.” ¹⁷The man did as Joseph said, and brought the men to Joseph’s house.

¹⁸Now the men were afraid because they were brought to Joseph’s house, and they said, “It is because of the money, replaced in our sacks the first time, that we have been brought in, so that he may have an opportunity to fall upon us, to make slaves of us and take our donkeys.”

¹⁹So they went up to the steward of Joseph’s house and spoke with him at the entrance to the house. ²⁰They said, “Oh, my lord, we came down the first time to buy food; ²¹and when we came to the lodging place we opened our sacks, and there was each one’s money in the top of his sack, our money in full weight. So we have brought it back with us. ²²Moreover we have brought down with us additional money to buy food. We do not know who put our money in our sacks.”

²³He replied, “*Be at peace, do not be afraid; your God and the God of your father must have put treasure in your sacks for you; I received your money.*” Then he brought Simeon out to them.

²⁴When the steward had brought the men into Joseph’s house, and given them water, and they had washed their feet, and when he had given their donkeys fodder, ²⁵they made the present ready for Joseph’s coming at noon, for they had heard that they would dine there.

This is the only time in the Joseph Story that God is called ‘God Almighty’ (‘El šadday). This is probably because it is a blessing formula and so uses an archaic form. Jacob entrusts his boys and their project to God’s mercy (43:14, raḥamîm).

The brothers return to Egypt with Benjamin. When Joseph sees that Benjamin is with them, he instructs his steward to prepare a feast: ‘the men are to dine with me at noon’ (43:16).

When they are taken to Joseph’s house, they fear the worst and try to explain everything to the steward.

His reply is totally unexpected. He greets them with ‘peace’ (šālôm), tells them not to be afraid, and assures them that he received the money on their first visit. The God of their family must have worked a miracle for them!

Simeon is freed and the steward takes the brothers into Joseph’s house and they get themselves ready to dine with him.

This is the second time that Joseph has been with his brothers since being sold into slavery, and how different from the previous occasion (see 42:6-25).

Again they bow before him (see 42:6), as his dream said they would (37:7). Joseph greets them warmly – the word *šālôm* occurs three times in verses 27-28.

He greets his young brother, his only full brother – called here ‘his mother’s son’ (43:29) – with a prayer that God will be gracious (*ḥānan*) to him. The combination of *raḥamîm* of verse 14 and *ḥānan* here takes us to the heart of the way YHWH was conceived in Israel. The classical text is found in the Book of Exodus:

YHWH, YHWH, a God merciful (*raḥûm*) and gracious (*ḥanûm*), slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (*ḥesed*) and faithfulness (*’emet*).

– Exodus 34:6

This is repeated as a refrain throughout the sacred texts of Israel (Psalm 86:15; 103:8; 111:4; 112:4; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nehemiah 9:17,31).

Joseph’s affection for his brother overwhelms him (43:30-31).

Besides the surprise of the welcome they were receiving, the brothers are astonished that they are asked to be seated in the presence of this powerful Egyptian. They are also surprised that Egyptians were prohibited from eating with Hebrews.

Though each group is served separately according to this law, they receive food from Joseph’s table and ‘ate and were merry with him’. Benjamin is singled out for special treatment.

²⁶When Joseph came home, they brought him the present that they had carried into the house, and bowed to the ground before him.

²⁷He inquired about their welfare, and said, “Is your father well, the old man of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?” ²⁸They said, “Your servant our father is well; he is still alive.” And they bowed their heads and did obeisance.

²⁹Then he looked up 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!”

³⁰With that, Joseph hurried out, because he was overcome with affection for his brother, and he was about to weep. So he went into a private room and wept there. ³¹Then he washed his face and came out; and controlling himself he said, “Serve the meal.”

³²They served him by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because the Egyptians could not eat with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians.

³³When they were seated before him, the firstborn according to his birthright and the youngest according to his youth, the men looked at one another in amazement.

³⁴Portions were taken to them from Joseph’s table, but Benjamin’s portion was five times as much as any of theirs. So they drank and were merry with him.

¹Then he commanded the steward of his house, "Fill the men's sacks with food, as much as they can carry, and put each man's money in the top of his sack. ²Put my cup, the silver cup, in the top of the sack of the youngest, with his money for the grain." And he did as Joseph told him.

³As soon as the morning was light, the men were sent away with their donkeys.

⁴When they had gone only a short distance from the city, Joseph said to his steward, "Go, follow after the men; and when you overtake them, say to them, 'Why have you returned evil for good? Why have you stolen my silver cup?

⁵Is it not from this that my lord drinks? Does he not indeed use it for divination? You have done wrong in doing this.'"

⁶When he overtook them, he repeated these words to them. ⁷They said to him, "Why does my lord speak such words as these? Far be it from your servants that they should do such a thing! ⁸Look, the money that we found at the top of our sacks, we brought back to you from the land of Canaan; why then would we steal silver or gold from your lord's house?

⁹Should it be found with any one of your servants, let him die; moreover the rest of us will become my lord's slaves."

¹⁰He said, "Even so; in accordance with your words, let it be: he with whom it is found shall become my slave, but the rest of you shall go free."

¹¹Then each one quickly lowered his sack to the ground, and each opened his sack.

¹²He searched, beginning with the eldest and ending with the youngest; and the cup was found in Benjamin's sack.

¹³At this they tore their clothes. Then each one loaded his donkey, and they returned to the city.

The meal is over and the brothers are preparing to go back to their father. Things have worked out perfectly. Joseph makes sure they have all the provisions they need and once again has their money returned (see 42:25). This time, however, he has his own special silver cup placed in the sack 'of the youngest'. We are not told why.

Scarcely have they departed when he sends his steward to accuse them of taking his own personal cup, the one he uses for divination (44:6). Israelites were forbidden to practice divination. It was considered a pagan practice (see Leviticus 19:26; Deuteronomy 18:10). For the story it is enough that it was known to be a practice in Egypt (see Isaiah 19:3). The authors show no more concern in attributing the practice to Joseph than we might have in regard to someone who reads tea leaves in a cup.

The brothers are offended at the accusation and confidently reject it. They remind the steward of how they returned the money that they discovered in their sacks on their way home from their previous visit. So sure are they of their innocence that they declare that, if the steward finds the cup, the one responsible should die and the rest of them will be slaves. The message from Joseph, however, is that the one responsible will be a slave, the rest may go free.

They are all horrified when the cup is found in Benjamin's sack. There is no way that they will let him go back alone, so they all return with him to the city.

Joseph directly accuses his brothers and once again we see them prostrate before him (see 37:7). The rest of the chapter is given over to the longest speech in Genesis, and a brilliantly composed one. Judah is portrayed as the leader of the family (see the comment on 43:3), and it is he who responds to the accusation levelled at them by Joseph.

His speech prepares the way for full reconciliation. With dignity, and with the respect appropriate to the occasion, Judah acknowledges their complete helplessness in the face of the accusation, but he does not accept their guilt. Not for stealing the cup.

However, neither does he claim innocence. They are guilty (44:16), guilty for what they did years ago to Joseph (see 42:21).

Now comes the final test. Joseph insists that he will punish only the one in whose sack the cup was discovered. The rest can go back to their father in peace (44:17, *šālôm*).

Judah reminds Joseph of the discussion that took place on their first visit (see 42:6-20). This time he highlights the special relationship between Benjamin and his father, such that the father cannot possibly live without him. Even though verse 22 was not in fact part of the original dialogue with Joseph, Judah includes it because it underlies everything that was shared. He is appealing to Joseph's feeling for an old, broken man.

When Judah speaks of Benjamin there is not the slightest hint of envy, but only of a deeply felt concern for the their father.

¹⁴Judah and his brothers came to Joseph's house while he was still there; and they fell to the ground before him.

¹⁵Joseph said to them, "What deed is this that you have done? Do you not know that one such as I can practice divination?"

¹⁶And Judah said, "What can we say to my lord? What can we speak? How can we clear ourselves? God has found out the guilt of your servants; here we are then, my lord's slaves, both we and also the one in whose possession the cup has been found."

¹⁷But he said, "Far be it from me that I should do so! Only the one in whose possession the cup was found shall be my slave; but as for you, go up in peace to your father."

¹⁸Then Judah stepped up to him and said, "O my lord, let your servant please speak a word in my lord's ears, and do not be angry with your servant; for you are like Pharaoh himself.

¹⁹My lord asked his servants, saying, 'Have you a father or a brother?'

²⁰And we said to my lord, 'We have a father, an old man, and a young brother, the child of his old age. His brother is dead; he alone is left of his mother's children, and his father loves him.'

²¹Then you said to your servants, 'Bring him down to me, so that I may set my eyes on him.'

²²We said to my lord, 'The boy cannot leave his father, for if he should leave his father, his father would die.'

²³Then you said to your servants, 'Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you shall see my face no more.'

²⁴When we went back to your servant my father we told him the words of my lord.

²⁵And when our father said, 'Go again, buy us a little food,' ²⁶we said, 'We cannot go down. Only if our youngest brother goes with us, will we go down; for we cannot see the man's face unless our youngest brother is with us.'

²⁷Then your servant my father said to us, 'You know that my wife bore me two sons; ²⁸one left me, and I said, Surely he has been torn to pieces; and I have never seen him since. ²⁹If you take this one also from me, and harm comes to him, you will bring down my gray hairs in sorrow to Sheol.'

³⁰Now therefore, when I come to your servant my father and the boy is not with us, then, as his life is bound up in the boy's life, ³¹when he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die; and your servants will bring down the gray hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol.

³²For your servant became surety for the boy to my father, saying, 'If I do not bring him back to you, then I will bear the blame in the sight of my father all my life.'

³³Now therefore, please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord in place of the boy; and let the boy go back with his brothers. ³⁴For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father."

Judah then tells Joseph of what happened between them and their father when they went home after the previous visit. He is appealing to Joseph not to break their father's heart by bringing 'the gray hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol'(44:31; see 37:35; 42:38).

Judah concludes his appeal by telling Joseph that he had gone surety for Benjamin (see 43:9), and he offers to take Benjamin's place. His deep feeling for his father is such that he is willing to give up his own freedom if Joseph will only let Benjamin return.

Judah is speaking for all the brothers. His words are proof that a profound growth has taken place. They confess their guilt and are clearly repentant. When they sold Joseph into slavery they had no concern for their father's sorrow or for what might happen to Joseph. Now they are willing to give their lives to save Benjamin and to save their father from any further sorrow.

They have passed the test. Full reconciliation is now possible.

For Joseph's brothers it is as though Joseph has risen from the dead. We are reminded of the reaction of Jesus' disciples on the day of the resurrection:

Jesus stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ... it is I myself. Touch me and see.

– Luke 24:36-39

Joseph identifies himself as 'your brother whom you sold into Egypt' (45:4). Their past sin must be named so that its power can be broken, not by the power Joseph has in Egypt, but by a brother's love. Joseph does not mention forgiveness – he does not wish to shame them. His passionate love is proof enough of it – and there is no other way to open up a new future for them all.

Verses 5-8 contain the central theological statement of the Joseph Story: 'God has sent me to preserve life' (45:5 and 7); 'It was not you who sent me, but God' (45:8). On the human level we have seen envy, deception and callous cruelty. We have seen fumbling efforts to deter others from evil. We have seen a loving, but very human and not so wise, father brought to the edge of despair. We have seen a lot of goodness and good sense shown in Egypt to a talented stranger. We have also seen what a scorned woman can do and what a thoughtless cupbearer can leave undone.

Through all this we have seen the power of a dream. We have seen God working in hidden ways, working wherever goodness and love open a way for grace. Joseph sees, and declares for the others to see, that it is God, the giver of the dream, who has brought him to power in the Empire of Egypt so that he might save his family.

So impressed are the post-exilic authors of Genesis that they cannot resist inserting a comment in verse seven, reminding their contemporaries, the remnant and survivors of the exile, that God continues to work in history for their salvation and for the salvation of Israel.

¹Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers.

²And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it.

³Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so *stunned* were they at his presence.

⁴Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵And now do not be distressed, or *reproach* yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.

⁶For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. ⁷God sent me before you [to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors].

⁸So 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.

‘God sent me to preserve life’

In the Isaiah scroll we read:

You whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners,
saying to you, “You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off”;
do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand ...
Those who war against you shall be as nothing at all.
For I, YHWH your God, hold your right hand;
it is I who say to you, “Do not fear, I will help you.”

– Isaiah 44:24-27

Listen, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen!
Thus says YHWH who made you, who formed you in the womb and will help you:
Do not fear, O Jacob my servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen.
For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground;
I will pour my spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring.
They shall spring up like a green tamarisk, like willows by flowing streams.
This one will say, “I am the YHWH’s,” another will be called by the name of Jacob,
yet another will write on the hand, “YHWH’s,” and adopt the name of Israel.

– Isaiah 44:1-5

It is God who sent Joseph to Egypt to save his people. We recall the words of Jesus:

I have come that you may live and live to the full.

– John 10:10

As was observed earlier, God does not control the behaviour of human beings, any more than God controls the working of nature. God respects the freedom that God created. But, as the Joseph Story demonstrates, God is not absent or indifferent to his creatures. It is God who inspires the dream. It is God who inspires:

whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, excellent or worthy of praise.

– Philippians 4:8

The prophets remind us of this overarching truth:

YHWH of hosts has sworn: As I have designed, so shall it be;
and as I have planned, so shall it come to pass ...
This is the plan that is planned concerning the whole earth;
and this is the hand that is stretched out over all the nations.
YHWH of hosts has planned, and who will annul it?
His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back?

– Isaiah 44:24-27

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says YHWH, plans for your welfare
and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

– Jeremiah 29:11

There is no place for human complacency. God does not substitute for our failure. But neither is there place for human pride, for:

It is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

– Philippians 2:13

While his brothers are still trying to absorb the stunning revelation – they are not yet ready to greet Joseph – Joseph speaks of his father. Since God has made Joseph lord of all Egypt’ (45:9), so as to save his family, and their children and their children’s children (45:10), he urges his brothers to persuade his father to hurry to Egypt. They can settle in Goshen (45:10), at the eastern end of the Nile delta bordering on the desert that separates Canaan from Egypt.

The past is healed. It is time to give expression to the reconciliation that God has brought about. The brothers kiss. We are left to imagine the conversation for ourselves.

Finally, Pharaoh and his ministers go even further than Joseph, offering Joseph’s family ‘the best of the land of Egypt’ (45:18). They could not be more generous in their welcome.

⁹Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, ‘Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. ¹⁰You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. ¹¹I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.’

¹²And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. ¹³You must tell my father how greatly I am honoured in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.”

¹⁴Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. ¹⁵And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

¹⁶When the report was heard in Pharaoh’s house, “Joseph’s brothers have come,” Pharaoh and his servants were pleased. ¹⁷Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Say to your brothers, ‘Do this: load your animals and go back to the land of Canaan. ¹⁸Take your father and your households and come to me, so that I may give you the best of the land of Egypt, and you may enjoy the fat of the land.’ ¹⁹You are further charged to say, ‘Do this: take wagons from the land of Egypt for your little ones and for your wives, and bring your father, and come. ²⁰Give no thought to your possessions, for the best of all the land of Egypt is yours.”

Jacob learns that Joseph is alive

²¹The sons of Israel did so. Joseph gave them wagons according to the instruction of Pharaoh, and he gave them provisions for the journey. ²²To each one of them he gave a set of garments; but to Benjamin he gave three hundred pieces of silver and five sets of garments. ²³To his father he sent the following: ten donkeys loaded with the good things of Egypt, and ten female donkeys loaded with grain, bread, and provision for his father on the journey.

²⁴Then he sent his brothers on their way, and as they were leaving he said to them, "Do not be perturbed along the way."

²⁵So they went up out of Egypt and came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan. ²⁶And they told him, "Joseph is still alive! He is even ruler over all the land of Egypt." He was stunned; he could not believe them. ²⁷But when they told him all the words of Joseph that he had said to them, and when he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of their father Jacob revived.

²⁸Israel said, "Enough! My son Joseph is still alive. I must go and see him before I die."

The brothers have been through a life-changing experience: They sold Joseph into slavery and thought nothing of it. In Egypt they find themselves facing enslavement.

They treated their brother as a stranger. They discover that a 'stranger' is their brother!

Earlier we read: 'They said to one another, "Alas, we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother; we saw his anguish when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen. That is why this anguish has come upon us"'(42:21).

Throughout the Joseph Story, Jacob has been plunged into inconsolable grief. Once he has recovered from the initial shock of the news that Joseph is still alive, he can breathe again (45:27). We recall Jesus' words:

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

– Luke 6:21

We could place on his lips the words of the shepherds when they heard the news of the Messiah's birth:

Let us go now and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.

– Luke 2:15

The word 'enough' hardly captures the meaning of the Hebrew 'rab'. It is closer to the words uttered by Jesus from the cross: 'It is accomplished!' (John 19:30). Jacob needs nothing more. Let death come. All that remains is to hasten 'to see him before I die.'

The shift from 'Jacob'(45:27) to 'Israel'(45:18) is interesting. He is going to Egypt as the father of the 'sons of Israel'(45:21). It is Israel who is going down to Egypt.

The authors of Genesis left the narrative of Jacob at the end of chapter 35, with the death and burial of Isaac. Here they pick up the narrative from an old story which recounted Jacob's journey to Egypt.

Abraham 'built an altar to YHWH and invoked the name of YHWH' at Bethel (12:8). At Bethel Jacob 'poured out a drink offering' (35:14). Just prior to his entry into the Promised Land after his long exile, Jacob invoked the God of his father Isaac and 'offered a sacrifice' on the heights of Gilead (31:54). Now at Beer-sheba, where Abraham 'called on the name of YHWH' (21:33), Jacob 'offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac' (46:1), as he is leaving for Egypt.

Once again the authors use God speaking to a patriarch to demonstrate the continuity of the promise, restricted here to 'I will make you a great nation' (see 12:2; 18:18; 35:11). The rest is specific to this situation: 'I will make you a great nation *there*' (46:3); 'I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again' (46:4 – a promise fulfilled in the Exodus); and 'Joseph's own hand shall close your eyes' (46:3).

They take the occasion to include here a family list of those who travelled with Jacob to Egypt.

Verses 28-30 come from the conclusion of the Joseph Story. The father and the son for whom he mourned so long meet with a long embrace. Jacob is ready now to die. It will be up to his sons to carry on the promise in a foreign land, sustained by the promise: 'I will bring you up again from Egypt' (46:4).

¹When Israel set out on his journey with all that he had and came to Beer-sheba, he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac.

²God spoke to Israel in visions of the night, and said, "Jacob, Jacob." And he said, "Here I am." ³Then he said, "I am God, the God of your father; do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there. ⁴I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again; and Joseph's own hand shall close your eyes."

⁵Then Jacob set out from Beer-sheba; and the sons of Israel carried their father Jacob, their little ones, and their wives, in the wagons that Pharaoh had sent to carry him.

⁶They also took their livestock and the goods that they had acquired in the land of Canaan, and they came into Egypt, Jacob and all his offspring with him, ⁷his sons, and his sons' sons with him, his daughters, and his sons' daughters; all his offspring he brought with him into Egypt.

[verses 8-27 - see next page]

²⁸Israel sent Judah ahead to Joseph to lead the way before him into Goshen. When they came to the land of Goshen, ²⁹Joseph made ready his chariot and went up to meet his father Israel in Goshen. He presented himself to him, fell on his neck, and wept on his neck a good while.

³⁰Israel said to Joseph, "I can die now, having seen for myself that you are still alive."

⁸Now these are the names of the Israelites, Jacob and his offspring, who came to Egypt.

Jacob's children are listed according to his four wives, as in Genesis 29:31-35 (Leah); 30:5-8 (Bilhah); 30:9-13 (Zilpah); 30:17-21 (Leah); 30:24 and 35:18 (Rachel). The twelve sons of Jacob are listed, again according to their mothers, in Genesis 35:23-26. The list which follows includes the next generation.

Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, ⁹and the children of Reuben: Hanoch, Pallu, Hezron, and Carmi.

¹⁰The children of Simeon: Jemuel, Jamin, Ohad, Jachin, Zohar, and Shaul, the son of a Canaanite woman.

¹¹The children of Levi: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari.

¹²The children of Judah: Er, Onan, Shelah, Perez, and Zerah (but Er and Onan died in the land of Canaan); [see Genesis 38:1-19] and the children of Perez were Hezron and Hamul.

¹³The children of Issachar: Tola, Puvah, Jashub, and Shimron.

¹⁴The children of Zebulun: Sered, Elon, and Jahleel

¹⁵(these are the sons of Leah, whom she bore to Jacob in Paddan-aram, together with his daughter Dinah; in all his sons and his daughters numbered thirty-three).

¹⁶The children of Gad: Ziphion, Haggi, Shuni, Ezbon, Eri, Arodi, and Areli.

¹⁷The children of Asher: Imnah, Ishvah, Ishvi, Beriah, and their sister Serah. The children of Beriah: Heber and Malchiel

¹⁸(these are the children of Zilpah, whom Laban gave to his daughter Leah; and these she bore to Jacob—sixteen persons).

¹⁹The children of Jacob's wife Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin.

²⁰To Joseph in the land of Egypt were born Manasseh and Ephraim [41:51-52] whom Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, bore to him.

²¹The children of Benjamin: Bela, Becher, Ashbel, Gera, Naaman, Ehi, Rosh, Muphim, Huphim, and Ard

²²(these are the children of Rachel, who were born to Jacob—fourteen persons in all).

²³The children of Dan: Hashum.

²⁴The children of Naphtali: Jahzeel, Guni, Jezer, and Shillem

²⁵(these are the children of Bilhah, whom Laban gave to his daughter Rachel, and these she bore to Jacob—seven persons in all).

²⁶All the persons belonging to Jacob who came into Egypt, who were his own offspring, not including the wives of his sons, were sixty-six persons in all.

²⁷The children of Joseph, who were born to him in Egypt, were two; all the persons of the house of Jacob who came into Egypt were seventy.

There is no need to make a precise count. The number 70 is symbolic of fullness (ten times seven). On the number seventy, see Exodus 1:5 and Deuteronomy 10:22.

The authors of Genesis seem to be drawing again on the Joseph Story.

Joseph's instructions insist that his brothers and their father's household leave the Pharaoh in no doubt that they are keepers of livestock and have no desire to change their occupation. In this way they will not be seen as a threat by the locals.

Joseph also insists that, even though Pharaoh has offered them, and will continue to offer them, 'the best part of the land'(47:6), they are to ask for Goshen, on the eastern edge of the delta. For one thing the local population do not take kindly to nomad shepherds mixing among them (46:34). More importantly, they must not forget that they are in Egypt only on a temporary basis because of the famine. They ask only 'to reside as aliens in the land'(47:4). Goshen is nearest to Canaan, and Canaan is their home. God has promised to take them home again. They are not to settle in Egypt.

46:31 Joseph said to his brothers and to his father's household, "I will go up and tell Pharaoh, and will say to him, 'My brothers and my father's household, who were in the land of Canaan, have come to me.

32The men are shepherds, for they have been keepers of livestock; and they have brought their flocks, and their herds, and all that they have.'

33When Pharaoh calls you, and says, 'What is your occupation?' **34**you shall say, 'Your servants have been keepers of livestock from our youth even until now, both we and our ancestors'—in order that you may settle in the land of Goshen, because all shepherds are abhorrent to the Egyptians."

47:1So Joseph went and told Pharaoh, "My father and my brothers, with their flocks and herds and all that they possess, have come from the land of Canaan; they are now in the land of Goshen."

2From among his brothers he took five men and presented them to Pharaoh.

3Pharaoh said to his brothers, "What is your occupation?" And they said to Pharaoh, "Your servants are shepherds, as our ancestors were." **4**They said to Pharaoh, "We have come to reside as aliens in the land; for there is no pasture for your servants' flocks because the famine is severe in the land of Canaan. Now, we ask you, let your servants settle in the land of Goshen."

5Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Your father and your brothers have come to you.

6The land of Egypt is before you; settle your father and your brothers in the best part of the land; let them live in the land of Goshen; and if you know that there are capable men among them, put them in charge of my livestock."

⁷Then Joseph brought in his father Jacob, and presented him before Pharaoh, and Jacob blessed Pharaoh.

⁸Pharaoh said to Jacob, “How many are the years of your life?”

⁹Jacob said to Pharaoh, “The years of my earthly sojourn are one hundred thirty; few and hard have been the years of my life. They do not compare with the years of the life of my ancestors during their long sojourn.”

¹⁰Then Jacob blessed Pharaoh, and went out from the presence of Pharaoh.

¹¹Joseph settled his father and his brothers, and granted them a holding in the land of Egypt, in the best part of the land, in the land of Rameses, as Pharaoh had instructed. ¹²And Joseph provided his father, his brothers, and all his father’s household with food, according to the number of their dependents.

[insert 47:13-26, see next page]

²⁷Thus Israel settled in the land of Egypt, in the region of Goshen; and they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly.

²⁸Jacob lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years; so the days of Jacob, the years of his life, were one hundred forty-seven years.

In this extraordinary scene, we witness the meeting of Jacob, the patriarch of the tribes of Israel, with Pharaoh, the ruler of the mightiest empire on earth.

Jacob’s blessing of Pharaoh can be read at a number of levels. It can be read as a polite greeting whereby Jacob wishes Pharaoh every prosperity. It can be read as the words of an old, dying man wishing life and abundance to Egypt. However, it is surely intended to recall the words of YHWH to Abraham that stand at the head of the patriarchal narrative:

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

– Genesis 12:2-3

The Empire needs Jacob. The world needs Israel, for it is through this family that the world will be blessed.

It is interesting to hear Goshen referred to as ‘the land of Rameses’ (47:11). This is an indication that the text was not composed in patriarchal times, for the pharaohs who went by that name belong to the 13th century BC. According to the biblical account, the great delta residence of these pharaohs was in the region of Goshen (see Exodus 1:11; 12:37).

The authors of Genesis have inserted the following story into the Joseph narrative. It shows a very vague knowledge of Egyptian customs. For one thing, from very ancient times the king of Egypt was considered the sole owner of the land. This is not something Joseph needed to organise. On a superficial level the story seems to be giving an account of the practice in Egypt (from which the priests were exempt) of giving a fifth of their produce to the pharaoh (47:26). At this level we are still watching Joseph organise and bring the blessing of God upon Egypt. A deeper reading may be suggesting that Joseph is falling for the temptations of Egypt. Power can easily lead to oppression (47:21), an oppression that will backfire upon the people of Israel (see Exodus 1:8ff).

¹³Now there was no food in all the land, for the famine was very severe. The land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine.

¹⁴Joseph collected all the money to be found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, in exchange for the grain that they bought; and Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh's house. ¹⁵When the money from the land of Egypt and from the land of Canaan was spent, all the Egyptians came to Joseph, and said, "Give us food! Why should we die before your eyes? For our money is gone." ¹⁶And Joseph answered, "Give me your livestock, and I will give you food in exchange for your livestock, if your money is gone."

¹⁷So they brought their livestock to Joseph; and Joseph gave them food in exchange for the horses, the flocks, the herds, and the donkeys. That year he supplied them with food in exchange for all their livestock.

¹⁸When that year was ended, they came to him the following year, and said to him, "We can not hide from my lord that our money is all spent; and the herds of cattle are my lord's. There is nothing left in the sight of my lord but our bodies and our lands. ¹⁹Shall we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Buy us and our land in exchange for food. We with our land will become slaves to Pharaoh; just give us seed, so that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become desolate." ²⁰So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh. All the Egyptians sold their fields, because the famine was severe upon them; and the land became Pharaoh's. ²¹As for the people, he made slaves of them from one end of Egypt to the other. ²²Only the land of the priests he did not buy; for the priests had a fixed allowance from Pharaoh, and lived on the allowance that Pharaoh gave them; therefore they did not sell their land.

²³Then Joseph said to the people, "Now that I have this day bought you and your land for Pharaoh, here is seed for you; sow the land. ²⁴And at the harvests you shall give one-fifth to Pharaoh, and four-fifths shall be your own, as seed for the field and as food for yourselves and your households, and as food for your little ones." ²⁵They said, "You have saved our lives; may it please my lord, we will be slaves to Pharaoh." ²⁶So Joseph made it a statute concerning the land of Egypt, and it stands to this day, that Pharaoh should have the fifth. The land of the priests alone did not become Pharaoh's.

Manasseh and Ephraim are to be included among the sons of Israel

47:29 When the time of Israel's death drew near, he called his son Joseph and said to him, "If I have found favour with you, put your hand under my thigh and promise to deal loyally and truly with me. Do not bury me in Egypt. ³⁰When I lie down with my ancestors, carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their burial place." He answered, "I will do as you have said." ³¹And he said, "Swear to me"; and he swore to him. Then Israel bowed himself on the head of his bed.

48:1 After this Joseph was told, "Your father is ill." So he took with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. ²When Jacob was told, "Your son Joseph has come to you," he summoned his strength and sat up in bed. ³And Jacob said to Joseph, "God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and he blessed me, ⁴and said to me, 'I am going to make you fruitful and increase your numbers; I will make of you a company of peoples, and will give this land to your offspring after you for a perpetual holding.' ⁵Therefore your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are now mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, just as Reuben and Simeon are. ⁶As for the offspring born to you after them, they shall be yours. They shall be recorded under the names of their brothers with regard to their inheritance. ⁷For when I came from Paddan, Rachel, alas, died in the land of Canaan on the way, while there was still some distance to go to Ephrath; and I buried her there on the way to Ephrath" (that is, Bethlehem).

⁸When Israel saw Joseph's sons, he said, "Who are these?" ⁹Joseph said to his father, "They are my sons, whom God has given me here." And he said, "Bring them to me, please, that I may bless them." ¹⁰Now the eyes of Israel were dim with age, and he could not see well. So Joseph brought them near him; and he kissed them and embraced them. ¹¹Israel said to Joseph, "I did not expect to see your face; and here God has let me see your children also." ¹²Then Joseph removed them from his father's knees, and he bowed himself with his face to the earth.

The patriarchal narrative will end with the death of Jacob, the last of the founding patriarchs and the 'father' of the twelve tribes that make up Israel.

In the first scene (49:29-31), Israel makes Joseph swear that he will be buried, not in Egypt, but with his ancestors. The method of taking the oath is the same as in 24:2,9.

The second scene is necessary to legitimate Joseph's sons as tribal fathers. They were born in Egypt (46:27) and did not come from Canaan with Jacob and his sons.

Jacob is speaking to Joseph. He recalls his encounter with 'God Almighty' ('Elšadday) at 'Luz' (see 35:6-15), and the promise made him there by God.

He tells Joseph that he intends to give his sons the same status as 'Reuben and Simeon' (48:6), his two eldest sons.

He speaks of the death of Joseph's mother, Rachel (see 35:16-19), indicating that he has chosen to favour Joseph's boys because of the special place Rachel has in his heart. They are her grandchildren.

Jacob ('Israel') has lived a life with much conflict and tragedy, but he has found that the blessing has not failed him. Before he dies he ensures that it continues on to the generation of his children's children.

Joseph makes sure that his firstborn, Manasseh is on Israel's right, but, impelled by a power beyond his control, Israel crosses his hands, thus giving the primary blessing to the younger son. The blessing, as he knows from his own life, is not determined by family custom (preference for the firstborn), or apparent merit, or what might appear appropriate and reasonable.

There is nothing the powerful Joseph can do about it. It is God who decides, using even the chance action of a dying and blind old man. Both boys are blessed, but 'Ephraim ahead of Manasseh' (48:20; echoes of 27:33-38).

For the first time we hear of blessing being handed on by the laying on of hands. Jacob's words of blessing (48:15-16) echo liturgical formulas (see Numbers 6:24-26), and complete the many blessings that have directed the patriarchal narrative. The God of Abraham and Isaac has 'walked with' Jacob (see 28:15), as he walked with Abraham (17:1). He has guided him throughout his life, as a shepherd guides sheep, and has 'redeemed' him from all harm. This is the only time the verb 'redeem' (*gā'al*) appears in Genesis. It looks forward to the Exodus (compare Jeremiah 31:10-11).

The word translated 'ridge' in verse 22 is *š'kem*, the same word used for the city of Shechem in Ephraim.

¹³Joseph took them both, Ephraim in his right hand toward Israel's left, and Manasseh in his left hand toward Israel's right, and brought them near him.

¹⁴But Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, crossing his hands, for Manasseh was the firstborn.

¹⁵He blessed Joseph, and said, "The God before whom my ancestors Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, ¹⁶the angel who has redeemed me from all harm, bless the boys; and in them let my name be perpetuated, and the name of my ancestors Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude on the earth."

¹⁷When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on the head of Ephraim, it displeased him; so he took his father's hand, to remove it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. ¹⁸Joseph said to his father, "Not so, my father! Since this one is the firstborn, put your right hand on his head." ¹⁹But his father refused, and said, "I know, my son, I know; he also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations." ²⁰So he blessed them that day, saying, "By you Israel will invoke blessings, saying, 'God make you like Ephraim and like Manasseh.'" So he put Ephraim ahead of Manasseh.

²¹Then Israel said to Joseph, "I am about to die, but God will be with you and will bring you again to the land of your ancestors. ²²I now give to you one *ridge* more than to your brothers, the *ridge* that I took from the hand of the Amorites with my sword and with my bow."

¹Then Jacob called his sons, and said: “Gather around, that I may tell you what will happen to you in days to come. ²Assemble and hear, O sons of Jacob; listen to Israel your father.

³Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might and the first fruits of my vigor, excelling in rank and excelling in power. ⁴Unstable as water, you shall no longer excel because you went up onto your father’s bed; then you defiled it—you went up onto my couch!

⁵Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords. ⁶May I never come into their council; may I not be joined to their company— for in their anger they killed men, and at their whim they hamstringed oxen. ⁷Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel.

⁸Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father’s sons shall bow down before you. ⁹Judah is a lion’s whelp; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He crouches down, he stretches out like a lion, like a lioness—who dares rouse him up? ¹⁰The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until *his ruler* comes; and the obedience of the peoples is his. ¹¹Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey’s colt to the choice vine, he washes his garments in wine and his robe in the blood of grapes; ¹²his eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk.

¹³Zebulun shall settle at the shore of the sea; he shall be a haven for ships, and his border shall be at Sidon.

¹⁴Issachar is a strong donkey, lying down between the sheepfolds; ¹⁵he saw that a resting place was good, and that the land was pleasant; so he bowed his shoulder to the burden, and became a slave at forced labour.

One can imagine that there would have been many short sayings attempting to sum up the spirit of a tribe, and that those contained in this chapter are dependent upon the perspective of the tribe that collected them and attributed them to Jacob. Here we see things from the point of view of the Joseph (Ephraim) tribe, though the final authors being from Judah may have substituted slogans favourable to their tribe. The first six tribes are sons of Leah (35:23).

The tribe of Reuben (49:3-4) was overrun by Moab. It is dismissed here because of a scene already recounted (35:22).

The tribe of Simeon was absorbed into Judah, and the tribe of Levi lacked any tribal territory (Deuteronomy 33:8-1). They are dismissed also for behaviour noted earlier (34:25-26).

Judah’s importance is because of David, Solomon and Jerusalem, and also because it alone stood when the kingdom of Israel was ravaged by Assyria. It was to Judah that the refugees from the north had to flee. ‘His ruler’ seems to be a reference to David, along with the flattering description of the king’s prosperity and beauty.

The tribe of Zebulun were in the southern highlands of Galilee, facing towards the sea. The tribe of Issachar inhabited the fertile plain of Esdraelon, but the price they paid was having to serve the Canaanite towns.

The tribe of Dan seems to have originally been on the western slopes of Ephraim, but pressure from the Philistines forced it to withdraw to the northernmost mountain area of Galilee (Joshua 19:40-48).

A pious scribe added the prayer of verse eighteen (see Psalm 119:166).

The tribe of Gad was east of Ephraim, across the Jordan. The verb 'to raid' is *gûd* (contrast 30:11). The tribe of Asher inhabited the coastal strip north of Carmel. They are being criticised for trading with Canaanite towns. Naphtali, in the mountain heights of Galilee enjoyed its freedom.

This collection has nothing but praise for the blessings heaped upon the tribe of Joseph (compare Deuteronomy 33:13-16). Since 'Ephraim' is derived from the verb 'to bear fruit' (*pārâ*, see 41:52), 49:22 seems to be aimed at Ephraim.

Of special interest is the accumulation of names for God in 49:24-26 (compare 48:15-16). This is the only verse in Genesis that has 'Mighty One of Jacob' (but see Isaiah 49:26; 60:16 and Psalm 132:5). God was called 'Shepherd' in 48:15. 'Rock of Israel' is unique to this passage. 'God of your father' has occurred throughout the Jacob narrative. For 'Almighty' (*šadday*) see 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14 and 48:3.

The slogan concerning Benjamin may be related to the fact that the first king of Israel was Saul, from the tribe of Benjamin, a small tribe wedged in between Ephraim to the north and Judah to the south.

16Dan shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel. 17Dan shall be a snake by the roadside, a viper along the path, that bites the horse's heels so that its rider falls backward.

18I wait for your salvation, O YHWH

19Gad shall be raided by raiders, but he shall raid at their heels.

20Asher's food shall be rich, and he shall provide royal delicacies.

21Naphtali is a doe let loose that bears lovely fawns.

22Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring; his branches run over the wall. 23The archers fiercely attacked him; they shot at him and pressed him hard. 24Yet his bow remained taut, and his arms were made agile by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob, by the name of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, 25by the God of your father, who will help you, by the Almighty who will bless you with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that lies beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb. 26The blessings of your father are stronger than the blessings of the eternal mountains, the bounties of the everlasting hills; may they be on the head of Joseph, on the brow of him who was set apart from his brothers.

27Benjamin is a ravenous wolf, in the morning devouring the prey, and at evening dividing the spoil."

28All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father said to them when he blessed them, blessing each one of them with a suitable blessing.

Jacob's last words and death

**²⁹Then he charged them,
saying to them,
“I am about to be gathered
to my people. Bury me
with my ancestors—in the
cave in the field of Ephron
the Hittite, ³⁰in the cave
in the field at Machpelah,
near Mamre, in the land
of Canaan, in the field that
Abraham bought from
Ephron the Hittite as a
burial site.**

**³¹There Abraham and his
wife Sarah were buried;
there Isaac and his wife
Rebekah were buried;
and there I buried Leah—
³²the field and the cave that
is in it were purchased from
the Hittites.”**

**³³When Jacob ended his
charge to his sons, he drew
up his feet into the bed,
breathed his last, and was
gathered to his people.**

This scene picks up from the end of chapter 47, where Jacob made Joseph take an oath not to bury him in Egypt, but in the burial place of his ancestors. Chapter 48 was inserted to legitimise Ephraim and Manasseh as tribal fathers, and chapter 49 to link the tribal slogans with Jacob.

We are reminded of Abraham's purchase of the cave in which he buried his wife, Sarah (see chapter 23). This was the first part of the Promised Land to be 'possessed'. Abraham himself was buried there (25:8-9), and we are told here that Isaac was also buried here (see 35:29). Genesis does not record the deaths of Rebekah or Leah, but we find out here that they also were buried in this cave.

Jacob does not die hoping for a continuance of his personal life after his death. This idea emerged in Judaism only in the second century BC. He dies believing in:

The Mighty One of Jacob ...
the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel,
[his] God ... the Almighty.

– Genesis 49:24-25

The God before whom my ancestors Abraham
and Isaac walked,
the God who has been my shepherd
all my life to this day, the angel
who has redeemed me from all harm.

– Genesis 48:15-16

He dies believing in the promise:

In them [his children's children]
let my name be perpetuated,
and the name of my ancestors Abraham and
Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude on the
earth.

– Genesis 48:16

He dies believing in the dream:

God said to him, “I am God Almighty: be fruitful
and multiply; a nation and a company of nations
shall come from you, and kings shall spring from
you. The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I
will give to you, and I will give the land to your
offspring after you.”

– Genesis 35:11-12

In death Jacob is given a solemn embalming and seventy days of mourning in Egypt.

Pharaoh honours the promise Joseph made to his father (see 47:29-31), and Jacob's body is escorted home by representatives from the court and from the land, with all the pomp of a royal escort.

Verse ten is interesting. It speaks of the threshing floor as 'beyond the Jordan' (also 50:11). Perhaps this account was composed in exile and so from the perspective of Babylon. The place names occur only here and are otherwise unknown. Once in the Promised Land Joseph observes the customary seven days of mourning (see 1 Samuel 31:13).

Verse fourteen marks the end of the patriarchal narrative and of the Joseph Story.

¹Then Joseph threw himself on his father's face and wept over him and kissed him. ²Joseph commanded the physicians in his service to embalm his father. So the physicians embalmed Israel; ³they spent forty days in doing this, for that is the time required for embalming. And the Egyptians wept for him seventy days.

⁴When the days of weeping for him were past, Joseph addressed the household of Pharaoh, "If now I have found favor with you, please speak to Pharaoh as follows: ⁵My father made me swear an oath; he said, 'I am about to die. In the tomb that I hewed out for myself in the land of Canaan, there you shall bury me.' Now therefore let me go up, so that I may bury my father; then I will return." ⁶Pharaoh answered, "Go up, and bury your father, as he made you swear to do."

⁷So 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, ⁸as 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. ⁹Both chariots and charioteers went up with him. It was a very great company.

¹⁰When they came to the threshing floor of Atad, which is beyond the Jordan, they held there a very great and sorrowful lamentation; and he observed a time of mourning for his father seven days.

¹¹When the Canaanite inhabitants of the land saw the mourning on the threshing floor of Atad, they said, "This is a grievous mourning on the part of the Egyptians." Therefore the place was named Abel-mizraim; it is beyond the Jordan.

¹²Thus his sons did for him as he had instructed them. ¹³They carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him in the cave of the field at Machpelah, the field near Mamre, which Abraham bought as a burial site from Ephron the Hittite.

¹⁴After he had buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt with his brothers and all who had gone up with him to bury his father.

‘God intended it for good’

¹⁵Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph’s brothers said, “What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?”

¹⁶So they approached Joseph, saying, “Your father gave this instruction before he died,

¹⁷“Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.’ Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.”

Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, “We are here as your slaves.”

¹⁹But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? ²⁰Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.

²¹So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” *In this way he comforted them, speaking to their heart.*

After all that has happened since the reconciliation of 45:5-8 this reconciliation is surely superfluous. The authors of Genesis have included it here as an appendage, careful as they always are to preserve material that has come down to them. The plea of the brothers for forgiveness (50:17, nāša’) makes explicit what was implicit in 45:5-8. Their plea is in the language of the psalms:

I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, “I will confess my transgressions to YHWH,”
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

– Psalm 32:5

When the brothers fall down before him and declare themselves his slaves, our mind goes back to the dream (37:6-7). Its power continues.

Joseph’s response lifts them from the prison of their guilt and opens them to share God’s dream. The words ‘Do not be afraid’ (50:19) are heard again and again in the oracles of the exile, oracles promising freedom:

Do not fear, for I am with you,
do not be afraid, for I am your God.

– Isaiah 41:10

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you.

– Isaiah 43:1

Our sin, our human plans, can prevent us from receiving God’s grace, but they cannot stop God’s ‘wondrous deeds and designs toward us’ (Psalm 40:5). ‘The design of YHWH stands forever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations’ (Psalm 33:11). ‘The human mind may devise many plans, but it is YHWH’s purpose that will be established’ (Proverbs 19:21). ‘For surely I know the plans I have for you, says YHWH, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope’ (Jeremiah 29:11). The dream will have its way, and, with repentance and forgiveness, we can still share in that dream, for ‘we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose’ (Romans 8:28).

The final words echo the opening words of exilic scroll:

Comfort my people ... Speak to their heart.

– Isaiah 40:1-2

These two short pieces are added as an epilogue. Machir, mentioned here for the first time, appears regularly in Numbers and Joshua. 'Born on Joseph's knees' means that Joseph claimed these descendants as his own. The promise continues.

Verse 24-26 are constructed as a bridge to link the patriarchal history with the Exodus. Joseph reminds his brothers of God's promise. They are not to settle in Egypt, but will return 'to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob' (50:24). For the first time, the three great patriarchs are mentioned together. The era of the patriarchs is over. The time for the people of Israel has come, and, though they are outside the Promised Land, they have been called, and, like the patriarchs, they must be prepared to go when called by God. In the meantime, again like the patriarchs, they must believe in the promise, and wait for the time 'when God comes to you' (50:25).

Joseph has risen to power in Egypt. This was part of God's dream for the salvation of Egypt and of the family of the patriarchs. However, though the Joseph Story has shown Egypt at its best, Egypt is not the Promised Land. Joseph makes the people (the 'Israelites') promise on oath that they will bury him at home, in the Land of Promise (see Joshua 24:32).

Joseph dies aged one hundred and ten – considered by Egyptians to be the ideal life span. He is then embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt, while the people await the coming of God, when, 'with a strong hand YHWH [will bring them] out of Egypt' (Exodus 13:19).

²²So Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father's household; and Joseph lived one hundred ten years.

²³Joseph saw Ephraim's children of the third generation; the children of Machir son of Manasseh were also born on Joseph's knees.

²⁴Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die; but God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."

²⁵So Joseph made the Israelites swear, saying, "When God comes to you, you shall carry up my bones from here."

²⁶And Joseph died, being one hundred ten years old; he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.