

16. Genesis 37-50 Joseph



In the final scene Joseph assures his brothers that he has forgiven them: **'Am I in the place of God? You intended evil against me but God has turned it to good'** (Genesis 50:19-20).

From Cain's killing of Abel, Genesis has been building to this point. Only when the covenant family has resolved differences, can a covenant nation be born (Exodus).

'A tale of a doting father, a spoiled child, envious brothers, jealousy and unforeseen outcomes' (Sacks 145.3).

'Love is not unproblematic. Given to one but not another, to one more than another, it creates tensions that can turn to violence. Sensitivity to those who feel unloved is also necessary' (Sacks 145.9)

Joseph is 17. He gives Jacob a bad report about his brothers (37:2)

Genesis 37:3-4

‘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. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.’

He dreams that everything and everyone is bowing down to him, and he tells his dreams to his brothers, who hate him! (37:5-11)

Joseph's brothers are pasturing the flock at Dothan,
and Israel (Jacob) sends Joseph to report back to him (37:12-17).

Genesis 37:18-20

‘His brothers saw Joseph from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer. Come 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.”

Genesis 37:21-22

But when Reuben (Jacob's firstborn son, 29:32) heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.” Reuben 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.

They strip Joseph of his special robe and throw him into the pit.
A caravan of Ishmaelites come by on their way to Egypt (37:23-25).

Genesis 37:26-27

‘Then Judah (Leah’s fourth son, 29:35) said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, 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.’

Reuben finds the pit empty. They put blood on the robe and report to Jacob that an animal killed Joseph (37:28-35).

Genesis 37:36

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



Genesis 38

1. Judah marries a Canaanite who bears him three sons, Er, Onan and Shelah (38:1-5).
2. Er marries Tamar, but **'he was wicked in the sight of YHWH who put him to death'** (38:6-7).
3. Onan spilled his seed to avoid having children for Er, and **'YHWH put him to death also'** (38:8-10).
4. Tamar lives in Judah's house waiting for Shelah to grow up (38:11).
5. Tamar tricks Judah into having intercourse with her, so fulfilling her duty in handing on the line. She has twins, Perez and Zerah (38:12-30).

Tamar is praised in Ruth 4:12 and is mentioned in Jesus' genealogy (Matthew 1:3).

Genesis 39

1. Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, put Joseph in charge of his household (39:1-6).
2. Joseph refuses to lie with Potiphar's wife (39:6-10).
3. She accuses him, and has him put in prison (39:11-20).

Genesis 40

1. He is joined in prison by Pharaoh's cupbearer and chief baker (40:1-4).
2. They each have a dream and Joseph interprets them (40:5-19).
3. The baker is hanged, but the cupbearer is restored to his post (40:20-23).

Genesis 41

1. Pharaoh dreams, the chief cupbearer remembers that has neglected to thank Joseph. He is summoned and interprets Pharaoh's dreams. Pharaoh appoints Joseph his viceroy (41: 1-44).

2. 'Pharaoh 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' (41:45).

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.



3. Joseph sets about collecting grain before the years of famine (41:46-49).

4. 'Joseph had two sons, whom Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, bore to him. Joseph named the firstborn **Manasseh**, "For," he said, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house." The second he named **Ephraim**, "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes" (41:50-52).

5. Then come the years of famine (41:53-57).

'All the world came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because the famine became severe throughout the world' (41:57).

Joseph 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.

Genesis 42

‘When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, “Why are you fearful? I 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.” So ten of Joseph’s brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt’ (42:1-3).

‘But Jacob did not send Joseph’s brother **Benjamin** with his brothers, for he feared that harm might come to him. Thus the sons of Israel were among the other people who came to buy grain, for the famine had reached the land of Canaan’ (42:4-5).

‘Now 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. When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he acted as a stranger and spoke harshly to them. “Where do you come from?” he said. They said, “From the land of Canaan, to buy food.” Although Joseph had recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him’ (42:6-8).

Joseph determines to test them and demands that Benjamin come to Egypt. One of them must stay as hostage (42:9-21).

Joseph overhears **Reuben** reminding the others that he was against their harming Joseph. Joseph picks **Simeon** (Jacob’s second son, 29:33) to stay (42:22-24).



Joseph gave them provisions for their journey. They find the money they paid is in their sacks (42:25-28).

The brothers report back to Jacob who cannot let Benjamin go. 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 does not want to let Benjamin go (42:29-36).

Then 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.” But Jacob 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.” (42:37-38).

Genesis 43

‘Now the famine was severe in the land. And 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.”

But **Judah** said to him, “The man solemnly warned us, saying, ‘You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.’ If you will send our brother with us, we will go down and buy you food; but 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.’” (43:1-5).

‘Then 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. I 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’ (43:8-9).

Reluctantly Jacob lets Benjamin go.

‘May 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’ (43:14).

Joseph invites them to dine with him. ‘They bowed to the ground before him’ (43:16-26).

Joseph inquires about their father and is overcome with tears when he sees Benjamin who is given a larger portion (43:26-34).

Genesis 44

Joseph lets them all go free, but arranges to have his silver cup placed in Benjamin's sack. Joseph's steward follows and discovers the cup in Benjamin's sack (44:1-13).

‘Judah and his brothers came to Joseph's house while he was still there; and they fell to the ground before him. Joseph said to them, “What deed is this that you have done? Do you not know that one such as I can practice divination?” And 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.” But 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.” (44:14-17).

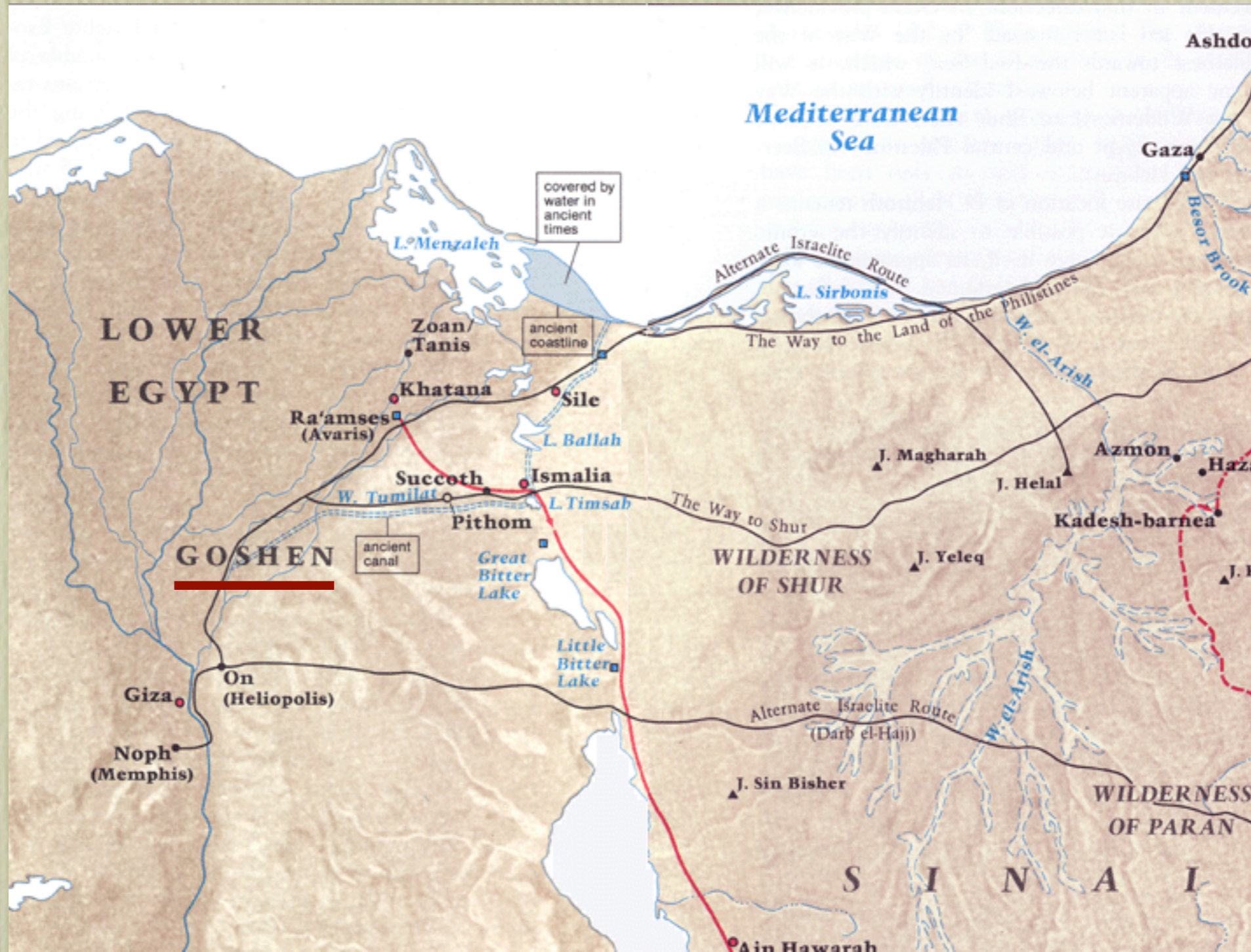
Judah reminds Joseph of the discussion that took place on their first visit (see 42:6-20). This time he highlights the special relationship between Benjamin and his father, such that the father cannot possibly live without him. He is appealing to Joseph's feeling for an old, broken man. When Judah speaks of Benjamin there is not the slightest hint of envy, but only of a deeply felt concern for their father (44:18-32).

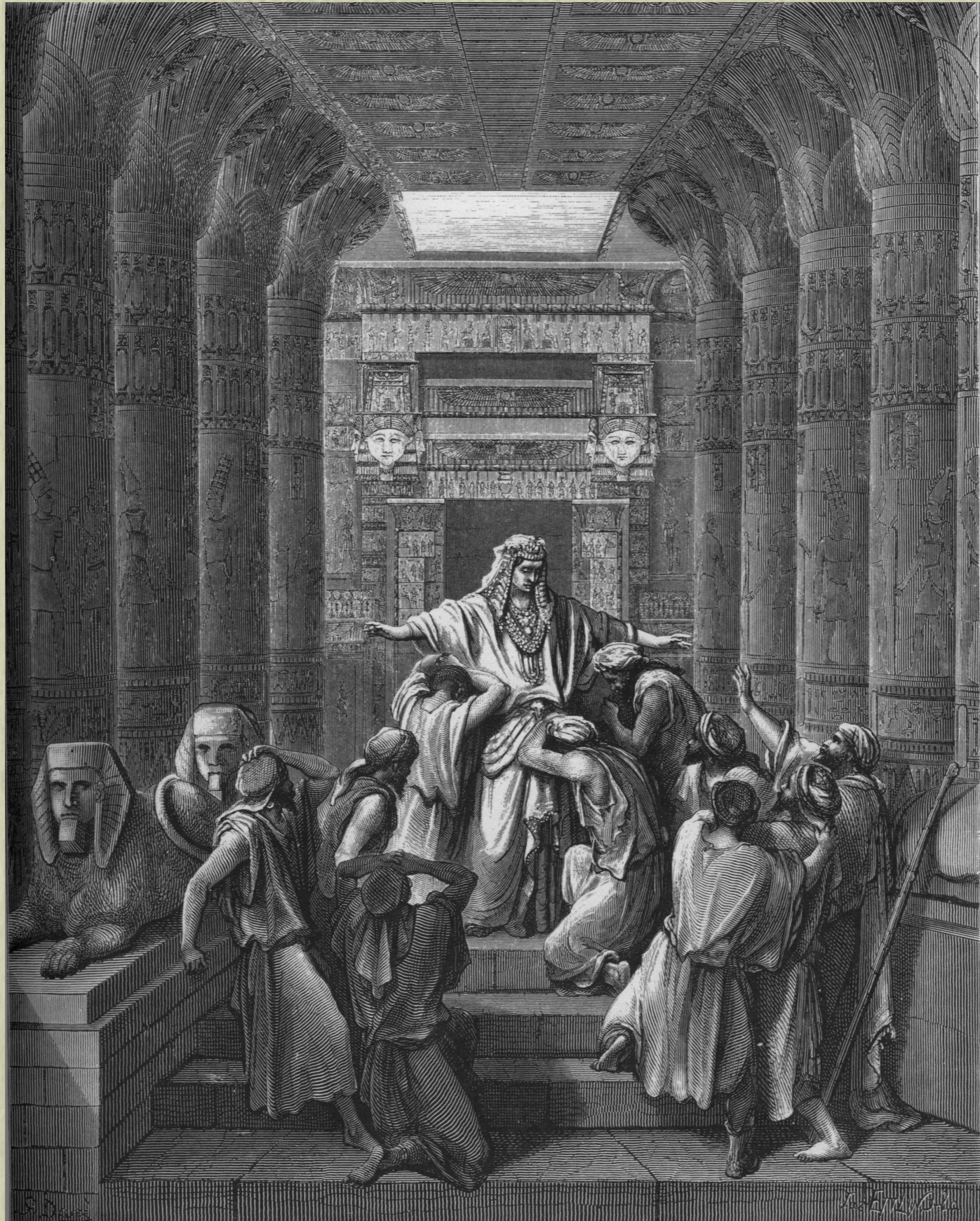
‘Now therefore, please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord in place of the boy; and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father.’ (44:33-34).

Genesis 45

‘Then 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. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph 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. Then 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. And now do not be distressed, or reproach yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life’ (45:1-5).

Joseph invites them to return with their father and settle in Goshen (45:6-13).





Genesis 45:14-20

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

When the report was heard in Pharaoh’s house, “Joseph’s brothers have come,” Pharaoh and his servants were pleased. Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Say to your brothers, ‘Do this: load your animals and go back to the land of Canaan. Take 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.’ You 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. Give no thought to your possessions, for the best of all the land of Egypt is yours.’”

When Jacob receives the news: ‘Enough! My son Joseph is still alive. I must go and see him before I die’ (45:26).

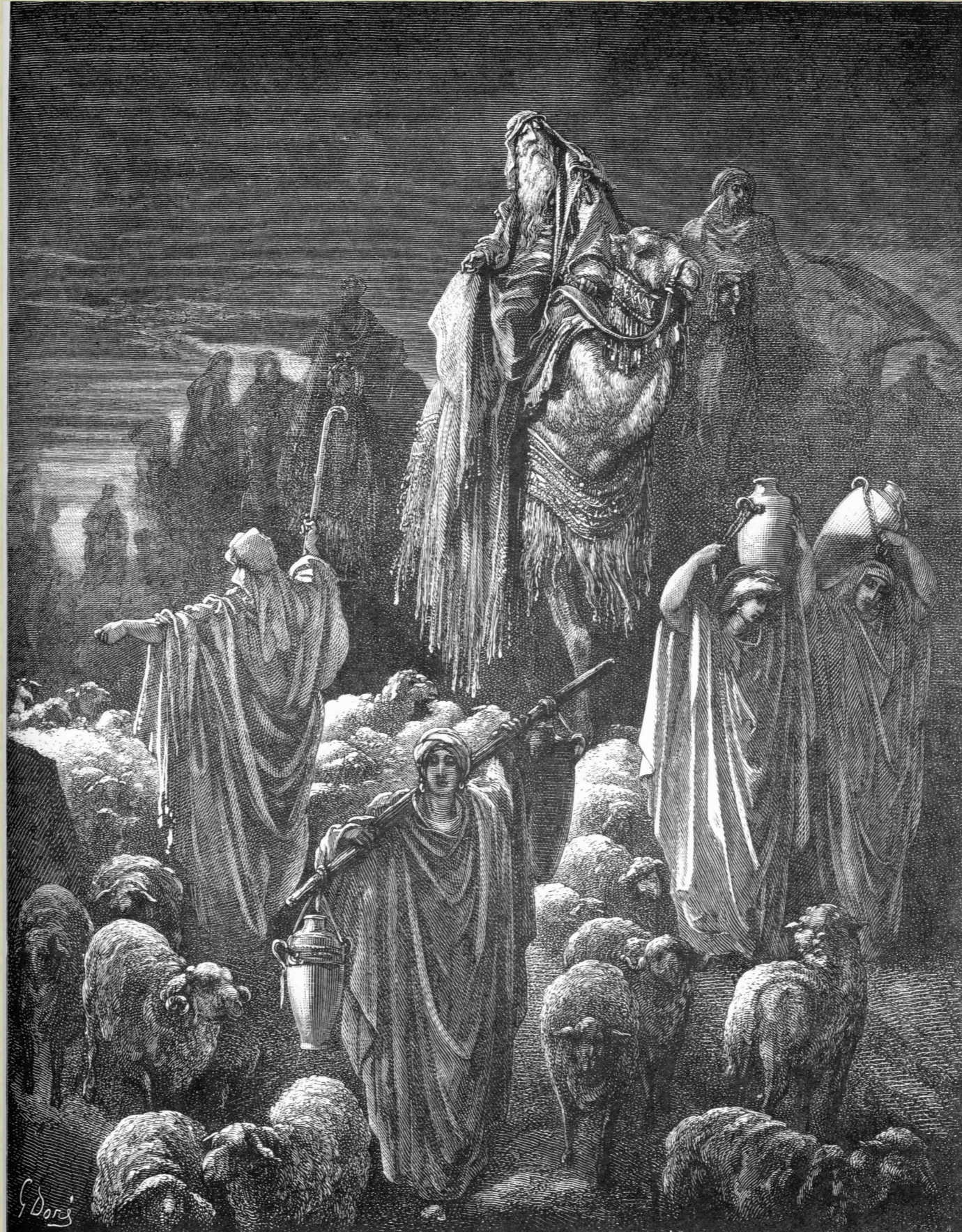
The brothers have been through a life-changing experience: They sold Joseph into slavery and thought nothing of it. In Egypt they find themselves facing enslavement. They treated their brother as a stranger. They discover that a 'stranger' is their brother!

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).

Genesis 46

‘When 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. God spoke to Israel in visions of the night, and said, “Jacob, Jacob.” And he said, “Here I am.” Then 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. I 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.” Then 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. They 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, his sons, and his sons’ sons with him, his daughters, and his sons’ daughters; all his offspring he brought with him into Egypt’ (46:1-7).





List of those who came with Jacob to Egypt (46:8-27).

‘Israel sent Judah ahead to Joseph to lead the way before him into Goshen. When they came to the land of Goshen, Joseph 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. Israel said to Joseph, “I can die now, having seen for myself that you are still alive.” (46:28-30).

Joseph goes to tell Pharaoh (46:31 - 47:8).

‘Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Your father and your brothers have come to you. The 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.” (47:5-6).

‘Then Joseph brought in his father Jacob, and presented him before Pharaoh, and Jacob blessed Pharaoh’ (47:7-10).

This recalls 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.

Joseph settles his family ‘in the land of Rameses’ (47:11-12).

Insert. we watch Joseph organising Egypt (47:13-26).

‘Thus Israel settled in the land of Egypt, in the region of Goshen; and they gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly. Jacob lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years; so the days of Jacob, the years of his life, were one hundred forty-seven years’ (47:27-28).

‘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. When 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.” And he said, “Swear to me”; and he swore to him. Then Israel bowed himself on the head of his bed’ (47:29-31).



Genesis 48

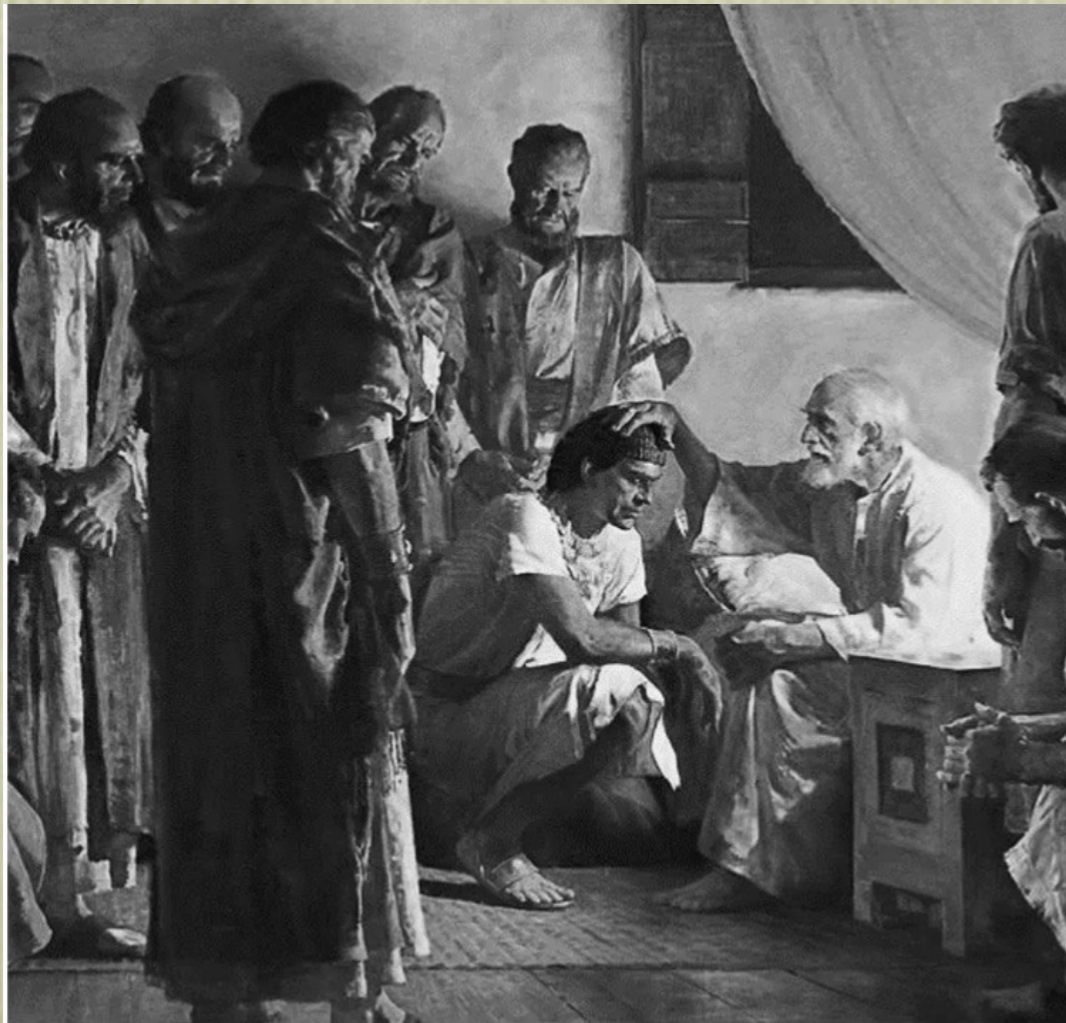
Jacob acknowledges Ephraim and Manasseh who were born in Egypt (48:1-13).

Jacob insists on giving his first blessing not for Manasseh, Joseph's firstborn, but for Ephraim (48:14-20). There are echoes of God's choice of Isaac (27:33-38).



Genesis 49

Jacob blesses his 12 sons and dies



Genesis 50

Jacob is embalmed in Egypt
and buried with his ancestors

‘Realizing 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?” So they approached Joseph, saying, “Your father gave this instruction before he died, ‘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. Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, “We are here as your slaves.” But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even 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. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” In this way he reassured them, speaking to their heart’. (50:15-21).

‘So Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father’s household; and Joseph lived one hundred ten years. Joseph saw Ephraim’s children of the third generation; the children of Machir son of Manasseh were also born on Joseph’s knees. Then 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.” So Joseph made the Israelites swear, saying, “When God comes to you, you shall carry up my bones from here.” And Joseph died, being one hundred ten years old; he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt’ (50:22-26).

‘If we can change, then the future is not destined to be an action replay of the past ... If we can change ourselves, together we can change the world’ (Sacks page 157).

Jonathan Sacks 'Not in God's Name' (H&S 2015)

Chapter 14 "Letting go of hate"(238-251)

'I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain'(James Arthur Baldwin).

'Do not hate an Egyptian. You were a stranger in his land'(Deut 23:7).

'If the Israelites continued to hate their erstwhile enemies, Moses would have succeeded in taking the Israelites out of Egypt, but he would have failed to take Egypt out of the Israelites'(Sacks, 240).

‘Memory becomes a moral force: not a way of preserving hate, but, to the contrary, a way of conquering hate by recalling what it feels like to be its victim. Remember, not to live in the past, but to prevent a repetition of the past’(Sacks, 244).

‘If you see your enemy’s donkey sagging under its burden, you shall not pass by. You shall surely let go of the hate you have in your heart towards him’(Targum of Exodus 23:5).

Vengeance belongs to God = it does not belong to us!

Not a blame culture (the abdication of freedom),

but a penitential one (what can I do about the situation?)

What can I learn from the experience of being oppressed to help build a society that is not oppressive)

‘Special praise must go to a series of popes: John XXIII who began the process leading to Vatican II and *Nostra Aetate*, Paul VI who completed it, and John-Paul II and Benedict XVI, both of whom continued it in their own way. Greater even than these, however, is the current Pope, Francis I. On 12 September 2013, in an open letter to the editor of an Italian newspaper, *La Repubblica*, he wrote: “God’s fidelity to the close covenant with Israel never failed, and ... through the terrible trials of these centuries, the Jews have kept their faith in God. And for this we shall never be sufficiently grateful to them as Church but also as humanity’(Sacks 261-262).

‘Our common humanity (the covenant with Noah) precedes our religious differences (the covenant with Abraham)’(Sacks, page 264).