Victim to Victor

“Victor”

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Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Text(s): 42-50

Series Textual Outline: Review with Comments

The story of Joseph is a genuine literary drama, constructed in ancient near eastern fashion from materials that were present in Israel’s long oral tradition. One scholar succinctly outlines the episodes as a chiasm at the center, surrounded with introductory material:

- Joseph sold into Egypt (37:2-36)
- Tamar and Judah (38:1-3)
- Joseph and Potiphar (39:1-20)
- Joseph in the Palace (41:1-57)
- First visit of Joseph’s Family to Egypt (42:1-38)
- Second visit of Joseph’s Family to Egypt (43:1-45:28)
- Third visit of Joseph’s Family to Egypt (46:1-47:31)
- The Last Days of Jacob and Joseph (48:1-50:26)

[Speiser remarks that this story “is at once the most intricately constructed and the best integrated of all the patriarchal histories. For sustained dramatic effect the narrative is unsurpassed in the whole Pentateuch.” Three hypothetical sources supply threads to this narrative, dominated by those called J and E, while P supplies editorial assistance. With great care, the final editor of Genesis 37-50 respects the substantial sections of the sources and puts them in sequence with occasional weaving of the seams thereby created. Likely, P touched this effort last, placing the last edition somewhere in the 6th century BCE or slightly later. We have reason to believe that witnesses to the exile and post-exilic period shared in the re-telling of Joseph’s story, and they no doubt reflected aspects of their own experience in doing so. After all, they, like Joseph, were strangers in a foreign land, placed there by coercion and enduring their share of humiliation in prison and dens of lions. It’s easy to imagine dependency of an even later narrative — that of Daniel — on the broad themes already cast by the Joseph story: Joseph in Egypt and Daniel (with Israel) in Babylon. That was the way narrative formation took place in biblical times when the Bible was acquiring its present shape.]

Selections from this Week’s Texts: Genesis 45; 50

45:1 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. 2 And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. 3 Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. 4 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. 5 And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. 6 For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. 7 God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. 8 So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. 9 Hurry 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. 10 You 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. 11 I 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.' 12 And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. 13 You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." 14 Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. 15 And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

16 When the report was heard in Pharaoh's house, "Joseph's brothers have come," Pharaoh and his servants were pleased. 17 Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Say to your brothers, 'Do this: load your animals and go back to the land of Canaan."

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50:1 Then Joseph threw himself on his father's face and wept over him and kissed him.  

Joseph commanded the physicians in his service to embalm his father. So the physicians embalmed Israel; 3 they spent forty days in doing this, for that is the time required for embalming. And the Egyptians wept for him seventy days.  

When 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: 5 My 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." 6 Pharaoh answered, "Go up, and bury your father, as he made you swear to do." 7 So 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, 8 as 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. 9 Both chariots and charioteers went up with him. It was a very great company. 10 When 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. 11 When 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. 12 Thus his sons did for him as he had instructed them. 13 They 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. 14 After he had buried his father, Joseph returned to Egypt with his brothers and all who had gone up with him to bury his father. 15 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?" 16 So 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. 18 Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." 19 But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? 20 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. 21 So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

22 So Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father's household; and Joseph lived one hundred ten years. 23 Joseph saw Ephraim's children of the third generation; the children of Machir son of Manasseh were also born on Joseph's knees. 24 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." 25 So Joseph made the Israelites swear, saying, "When God comes to you, you shall carry up my bones from here." 26 And Joseph died, being one hundred ten years old; he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.

Introduction

The material selected for this week's study skips ahead from chapter 41 to chapter 45, leaving us with a three chapter gap which requires summarization, else the story told loses its narrative edge. There is more than one way to unfold the biblical account of Joseph, and the worship committee has opted to follow this one. So, in what follows in our introduction, moves the storyline forward. We will need to make this move again to connect the dots supplied by chapter 46 to chapter 49.

First, a brief reminder about our last study, where the Egyptian plan conceived by Joseph under Pharaoh's direction made possible a surplus of food generated during the seven fruitful years. Now the whole world comes to Egypt for supplies as the foreshadowed famine decimates the surrounding lands. The strategy is, of course, to coax the family of Joseph into Egypt where he can reunite with them. Storytellers must plan carefully for such eventualities so that they do not seem too obvious or artificial. The pace of our narrative so
far ensures the kind of realism that keeps readers interested and on edge. Here then is our summary of Genesis 42-44.

Firmly established in his new role, matured by nearly fifty years of life experience, Joseph must face once more the reality of his covenant family. Egypt is not the promised land, although the whole world comes to Egypt for bread. But it will take events once more out of his control to bring about this reconciliation. Nothing in the text suggests that Joseph contemplated a trip back to Canaan. Instead, driven by the severe famine in Canaan, Jacob sends all of his sons but Benjamin (Rachel's youngest, Joseph's full brother) to Egypt for food. Upon their arrival there commences another dramatic sequence in our story, complete with a bit of trickery on Joseph's part. Thoroughly an Egyptian in appearance and manner, none of the brothers recognize him, but bow before him as foreshadowed in his earliest dreams, a fact he recalled. Acting dumb, he plays with them asking questions about things he already knows, threatening to expose them as spies, testing their truthfulness, and finally confining them for three days (42:1-11).

Determined to bring the whole family to Egypt, he contrives a ruse whereby one of them, Simeon, stays behind as surety, while the others go home and bring back young Benjamin. All of which throws Reuben, the firstborn, into a rage as he reminds the brothers of their sin against Joseph, and how they are now being punished these many years later for their crimes against Joseph (42:12-25). Laden with grain, they start the return trip to Jacob, unaware that Joseph refunded their payments and placed them in their travel sacks. Upon discovering this surprise they fall into panic, declaring, "What is this that God has done to us?" (42:28) Heavy with this sense of divine recrimination, they explain their experiences to Jacob, their father, who now refuses to send Benjamin, resigning himself to an early grave if anything happened to this last of Rachel's sons (42:29-38). Later he discloses his displeasure that Benjamin's existence had been revealed by them to the Vizier (43:6).

Backed to the wall by the ferocity of the famine, Jacob agrees to Judah's offer to become the redemptive agent of Benjamin's return if the father will agree to another trip to Egypt for food. Jacob agrees, but with conditions. They must restore the money two-fold and bring native Canaan fruits and other products to the Vizier as tribute. Ironically, these items closely match the goods carried by the Ishmaelite caravan which brought Joseph to Egypt years before (gum, balm, myrrh) (43:11). His words of benediction are moving: "May God Almighty ("El-Shaddai") grant you mercy before the man, and may he send back your other brother (Simeon) and Benjamin. And as for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved" (43:14).

Arriving in Egypt, they are taken directly to the house of Joseph, a cause for worry that he would deal severely with them because they had stolen the money. But Joseph's steward assures them that it was "Your God, the God of your father who has put treasure in your sacks for you" (43:23), and addresses them with the Semitic Shalom. Simeon is returned to them and shortly they appear before the Vizier again. He inquires after Jacob and is moved by the first sight of his full brother Benjamin "his mother's son", so much so that he excuses himself to hide his true emotion, washing his face. The meal is served, but the brothers are segregated from the Egyptians by custom. However, Joseph personally arranges their seating exactly according to age, and this prompts amazement on their part (43:33), as did the five-fold size of Benjamin's food portion. Joseph assumes the head of the table ("they sat before him") in yet one more ironic twist, drawing from his earliest dreams. As they prepare to return to Jacob, Joseph once more plants a ruse, putting his silver cup in Benjamin's sack, with money and grain.

Only a few miles from Egypt, they are detained by Joseph's steward and accused of theft and of the worst sort of ingratitude. Tensions mount as the cup is discovered in Benjamin's sack and the whole lot is hauled back to Egypt to appear before the Vizier once again. Interestingly, Judah assumes a prominent place in 44:14 with the identification "Judah and his brothers". Judah has lived the tragedy of those early years many times and faced his demons with Tamar. But he swore to his father his covenant loyalty for the care of Benjamin, and now he does not fail to take his stand before Joseph. Pleading for Benjamin's life, he pours out a moving tale of the sorrow of an old man, Jacob, who will be twice bereaved if Benjamin does not return. He reiterates his
covenant oath to Jacob and how he intends to keep it. He climaxes this lengthy speech with these words: "For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the evil that would find my father" (44:34). Can the reader scarcely believe the change in Judah? Was not this the man who engineered the sale of Joseph and set in motion the whole sorry tale of Joseph's loss to Jacob? Is not this the man who sulked off to a harlot to numb his feelings in the aftermath? And then was caught in a web with Tamar, his daughter-in-law, who later bore his child? Yet, here he stands, eloquently, movingly, courageously fulfilling his filial duties!

**Without Delay: Chapter 45**

The story culminates in Genesis 45:1-15. For readers, the idea that Joseph has achieved his promised rule over father and brothers has become evident in 42-44, and yet the participants in the story are still not aware of this connection until now. This is the chapter-in-waiting! Once at the summit of chapter 45, the progress flows freely among the details, derived from the careful plot preceding. Getting to this point required effort. Nothing makes this more impactful than the words of Judah in 44:18-34 which makes possible the turn of events, and the plot fills the screen with greater force than any of the characters on stage.

If Joseph seemed embedded in the politics of empire with its control of food and servitude of the population who wanted food; if he appeared to have shed his identity for the sake of royalty; if he seems every bit an Egyptian by the end of chapter 44 — that is all about to change. With the words, “Send everyone away from me” (45:1), the old Joseph of Jacob’s tribes once more appears onstage. There is yet something left of the covenant loyalty that knows blessing from God in the midst of adversity and loss. Joseph is still a Hebrew. For the “everyone” in our text no doubt refers to Egyptians that surround him and that are in his service for the sake of the empire. The whole bureaucracy is asked to leave the room so that he might “make himself known to his brothers.” After all, there is a real difference between the church and the world, and it is Joseph’s business at this crucial moment to make that clear to both Egypt and his family.

And Joseph, hearing the impassioned appeal, spoken by Judah, the brother who engineered his original exile, can contain himself no longer. Alone with his brothers he reveals himself to them: "I am Joseph!" What he now says reveals his depth of character (45:1-13):

1. Is my father still alive?
2. Don't be angry with yourselves because you sold me here.
3. God sent me before you to preserve life.
4. God sent me before you to preserve a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors.
5. God sent me here, not you.
6. God made me a father to Pharaoh, lord of his house, ruler over all Egypt.
7. Go to my father and bring him here and tell him "of all my honor in Egypt and of all that you have seen."

God … God .. God. The name that seemed so embarrassingly absent at the start of the narrative, now cascades with gushing force from every rock and rill visible to the readers. It’s all about God the sustainer, God the agent, God the ruler. With Egypt’s officers kept outside, refused admittance to this sacred moment, Joseph affirms that there is simply no room in the holy place for any other bearer of power. Not even Pharaoh is allowed with Joseph and his brothers at the moment of his revelation to them. Such revelation is too awesome for the kings and captains and cabinet officials and first secretaries and cupbearers and bakers. They are unworthy to share in the disclosure. They must stand outside the door and wait obediently while Vizier Joseph has his time with the brothers. There is a time to keep the world outside so that it might know the different between itself and the people of God.

What follows in the narrative only reinforces the sense of providence Joseph has expressed. Warmly embracing his younger brother, and then all his brothers, they exchange familial conversation (45:14-15). Brueggemann notes:

That is why 45:1-15 is structurally at the center of the entire Joseph narrative. In this speech of Joseph, the power of the conspiracy of chapter 37 is broken. The break with that awful deed comes in this lordly speech. But this
regal speech is based on the flood of passion discerned in 44:30; 45:1, 14-15. Joseph’s speech is filled with passion. There is as much at stake for him as for the brothers and the father.  

Ironically, Joseph remains a royal person while he lavishes emotion on family, marked by humility and trust in God. He may be vizier of Egypt, but he is more deeply brother to his brothers. In the simple words, “I am Joseph,” there is no formal title of his office. And God gets all the credit for anything that has “increased” in his life’s fortunes. Remember that his name carries with it this meaning in Hebrew: “to increase.” By making himself known to his brothers, he proves that a future lies up ahead for the little family of Jacob, and that God is already starting to making all things knew for them. Do we not hear echoes of the later prophets in this account?

8 But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; 9 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”; 10 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. 11 Yes, all who are incensed against you shall be ashamed and disgraced; those who strive against you shall be as nothing and shall perish. 12 You shall seek those who contend with you, but you shall not find them; those who war against you shall be as nothing at all. 13 For I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, “Do not fear, I will help you” (Isaiah 41:8-13).

God is at work in Joseph’s life, while Joseph also does his work in the land of Egypt. Both are true. Neither is diminished. God is free and so are we. In God’s working, we work. In our working, He works. God is no tyrant as he recognizes the autonomy of his creatures. As Barth once wrote: “This means He affirms and approves and recognizes and respects the autonomous activity” (Church Dogmatics, III, 3). With the mystery of the best novelist, God’s agency allows Joseph and brothers and Pharaoh to collude without knowing it. And in the end, we are led to confess with St. Paul in Romans 11:36, For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever. Amen. All the players in this drama are free, and all the players live fully under the sovereignty of God, ruled by His grace. Isaiah would later write:

24 The LORD of hosts has sworn: As I have designed, so shall it be; and as I have planned, so shall it come to pass: … 27 For the LORD of hosts has planned, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back? (Isaiah 14:24, 27).

8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts (Isaiah 55:8-9).

None of this happens in a vacuum but is finally reported to Pharaoh who immediately prepares the visitors with a richly laden caravan back to Jacob and an invitation for his sojourn in Egypt, concluding with the words: "Have no concern for your goods, for the best of all the land of Egypt is yours" (45:20). Joseph executes the wishes of his king and sends off his brothers with the parting words: "Do not quarrel on the way" (45:24). One wonders if he spoke in jest, knowing well what his brothers had done to him those many years before!

Another Summary: Genesis 46-49

The arrival in Canaan with the news to Jacob that his son Joseph was alive left the old man "numb" in heart. But the richly endowed caravan bore witness to the truth of Joseph's brothers, and he confessed "I will go and see him before I die" (45:28). Jacob's journey with his sons down into Egypt receives the blessing of God who assures him that he will become "a great nation", even in Egypt, and then at some unspecified time he will "come up again" (46:4). To reinforce this future vision, the writer commences a family tree of Jacob's offspring and their families, numbering the whole lot at "seventy" (46:27), the starting number of the sojourn in Egypt. Future stories in the Torah would bear witness to how that initial family grew to become "a great nation", even though exiles in Egypt.

And so Jacob and his family arrive in Egypt, settling in Goshen, a region suited for shepherds, but sufficiently removed from the Egyptian cities so as not to compete with them: "For every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians" (46:34). Scholars infer that since Egyptians also "kept animals" that the "abomination" had not to do with the profession but with the potential threat posed by "foreign shepherds" within the boundaries of Egypt. Historically, Semites had been rulers in Egypt, specifically the "Hyksos" who were nicknamed "shepherd kings". It is likely that the similarly between Jacob's family and these recent rulers might spark conflict—something both Joseph and Pharaoh wish to avoid. This of course makes the story of Joseph even more remarkable: he was a Semite and yet this fact did not provoke controversy within Egypt when Pharaoh made him Vizier. Once more the providence of God was at work in his life.

This would receive even greater reinforcement when called before Pharaoh, Joseph brings five of his brothers who admit to being shepherds. The Pharaoh is not offended but proceeds to ask for "able men" in Joseph's family to take charge of his own livestock (47:6). What follows this encounter is the moving audience of Jacob before Egypt's king. Asked for his age, Jacob admits to 130 years with apologies that he did not live up to his ancestor's longevity. The Pharaoh no doubt marveled at his age, and in turn receives the blessing of Jacob. The reader can only pause and reflect here on all that has come about because Joseph accepted the mysterious purposes of God and "went down to Egypt". Here stands aged Jacob, once the sojourner from Canaan, now the sojourner in Egypt blessing its supreme king. The dreams of Joseph have assumed larger-than-life proportions as they reach fulfillment in ways no one could have imagined. And because Joseph faithfully allow those dreams to speak to him with all the force of God's revealed word, his whole family found safety in the land where Joseph's wisdom prevailed.

As if the wise administration of Joseph thus far was not enough, the writer proceeds to tell how Joseph shrewdly handed over to Pharaoh Egypt's land in exchange for seed (47:20). With this the people could start afresh. It was a small price to pay, since they were allowed the use of the land to once more plant crops, reap a harvest and pay the Pharaoh twenty percent of the value as lease. So effective was this policy, suggests the writer, that it became official policy in Egypt. There was one exception: the priests were exempt. This is significant, for when the descendents of Jacob become a nation, similar provisions are made for the priestly Levites who are granted special cities throughout Canaan. Though Joseph's policies stressed the material well-being of Egypt and his own family, he did not neglect the spiritual life of the nation. Such policy reveals the deeper roots of Joseph's character. He was not only an astute politician. He was God's man and knew that wisdom and success were grounded in divine favor. The people who nourished its priestly life, while sustaining its material existence, honored God. Joseph knew it and made it official practice.

The long journey of Joseph's father nears its end, at the age of 147 years (47:28). In a moving scene, recorded in 47:29-31, Jacob approaches Joseph in a way that seems entirely upside down: "If I have found favor in your sight" (47:29) reads more like a subject talking with his king or a supplicant addressing his god. Once more the dreams of Joseph filter into the narrative. His own father "does obeisance" to the point of "bowing himself upon the head of his bed" (47:31). Jacob secures the promise of Joseph not to bury him in Egypt, but with his fathers in Canaan. This of course implies that neither man imagined Egypt to be their home, but only the marvelous provision of the faithful covenant God to spare their lives throughout the famine. By solemn oath, Joseph swears to his father, placing his hand on his thigh in ancient covenant fashion.

The sweeping Joseph narrative nears its completion, along with Jacob's life. Before the old patriarch blesses each of his own sons, he reveals to Joseph the special blessing God intends for his own sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. In prophetic fashion, Jacob speaks of their future and their growth into "a multitude" (48:16). Then, in yet one more reversal of human expectactions, he blesses the younger son in preference to the older. Had Joseph forgotten that he himself, the younger, been preferred to all his brothers by Jacob? He resists the reversal, but Jacob prevails: "his younger brother shall be greater than he..." (48:19). Together, the two sons of Joseph will become the symbol of divine blessing for all of Israel, a kind of firstfruits of what God intends for the whole nation (48:20).
Only after this special barakah ("blessing") for the offspring of Joseph does Jacob turn to the general blessing of his sons. One by one, he prophesies over each one (49:1). It is in this final testament of Jacob that we discover the special role for the recently repentant Judah, the brother who engineered Joseph's sale to the Ishmaelites: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him, and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples" (49:10). Indeed, the brother who once tried to end Joseph's life became the hopeful promise of Israel's future kingdom. And when David finally takes the throne centuries later, that hope finds its fulfillment. And when David's greater son, Jesus, announces the kingdom of God, at last Judah finds his true fulfillment.

Near the end of his barakah, Jacob turns once more to the lead character of the drama we have witnessed. Of him, Jacob makes the following pronouncements:

1. He is a fruitful bough whose branches run over the wall.
2. He is shot at by the archers.
3. He is sustained by the Mighty One, the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel.
4. He is blessed by God: from heaven, from the deep, from his offspring, from his father.
5. May blessing be on Joseph, set apart from his brothers (49:22-26).

And so Jacob dies, mourned by his family, and by Joseph most of all. Summoning his influence as Vizier of Egypt, Joseph arranges the embalming of his father, taking some forty days, while mourning his death for seventy. With the blessing of Pharaoh, Joseph takes a contingent of his family and returns to Canaan where he buries his father according to his father's instructions. The mourning on that occasion attracts the attention of the Canaanites who think these visitors are Egyptians (50:11). This detail is significant, since Egypt had royal cities in Canaan, and the residents would have respected the presence of their Egyptian superiors. So large a company of strangers might have stirred defensive fears on the part of the Canaanites had these visitors been seen as foreign Semites. As Egyptians, arrayed with Egyptian chariots and horses (see 50:9 where the writer calls them "a very great company"), Joseph and his family had more than sufficient protection by Pharaoh's direction. Once more the familiar theme appears: the blessing of God flows through the Egyptian blessing on Joseph and his family. As God told Abraham, "I will bless them who bless you" (Genesis 12:1-3).

Joseph and His Brothers Once Again (Genesis 50)
Bereaved of their father and back in Egypt, living in Joseph's realm, the brothers are seized with fear and send word to Joseph. For the first time they become specific in their repentance and their desire for Joseph's forgiveness. What was initial "dismay" (45:3) turned to genuine confession: (50:16-17)

16 So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died, 17 'Say to Joseph, Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.' And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." The reader might wonder at the second-hand nature of their confession: "Your father gave this command…", as if they could not simply speak for themselves or didn't think they could address Joseph directly, lacking his authority. But that is not how Joseph sees it. Instead, he turns aside their humbling words, "We are your servants" (50:18) and speaks firmly, but kindly to them:

19 But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? 20 As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. 21 So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

Throughout his life, Joseph witnessed the undeserved favor of God who remained faithful to the ancient covenant with Abraham. First, through the unsolicited favor given by his father Jacob who robed him with the royal coat, and then through the chain of events during the Egyptian sojourn. God remained the true superior to Joseph: higher than Jacob, higher than Pharaoh, and certainly higher than Joseph himself. No wonder he utters those words: "…am I in the place of God?" This Joseph left his impression on history, not because he was any
kind of hero, but because he knew where God stood in relationship to him. God was Joseph's hero, bringing
good out of intended evil. Joseph the reluctant favored son who knew through his dreams that God's purposes
exceeded his own; that human ambition, even that of his brothers, could not change the intentions of the ancient
promises of God. Grace begets grace; mercy fathers mercy. And so Joseph turns to his brothers in
unconditional forgiveness and extends covenant blessing to them, offering not only to forgive, but to provide for
them in comfort and kindness.

Joseph could have taken leave of Pharaoh and returned to Canaan. He could have remained in Canaan when he
buried Jacob. But something compelled him to remain in Egypt (50:22) until his death at 110 years, at which
time he reiterated the purposes of God and prophesied to his brothers: "God will visit you and bring you up out
of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob" (50:24). What Joseph does before his
death is to confirm the covenant with his brothers, offering them the promise. He then requires of them a
solemn oath: that they will bring up his bones to Canaan. To the very end, Joseph remains the prince in his
father's house: not for his own sake, but for theirs. By oath and promise he secures the terms of the covenant
for future generations. At the same time, he exhibits yet another mark of godly character: faith that God would
one day return his covenant people to their rightful inheritance, the land of Canaan (50:25). For this, the New
Testament would honor him: (Hebrews 11:22) "By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the
exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones." And so her dies, is embalmed and placed "in
a coffin in Egypt" (50:26). His legacy was alive all around him. His coffin a witness to the blessings of God
accomplished through from "for many people".

Conclusion
Victim to Victor. There are elements in the Joseph story that commend him as a hero among the great men of
Israel. Surely no writer would devote so much space to a single account, considering that
Genesis is also home
to the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, not to mention the sweeping tale of Noah’s flood, and the world-
changing decisions of Adam in Eden. Surely there are bigger stories than Joseph’s. And yet readers have
reason to wonder why the attention falls on this young man — the naïve dreamer who knew less about his
dreams when he had them than when he lived them, and yet bragged more about them when he knew less. By
the time his story ends, the dreamer talked nothing more about his dreams, and only about where they took him.
Even then, the principal agent of his narrative is really not the dream, but the dream giver, the God of his
ancestors who proved Himself faithful to His child in Egypt.

Much is kept hidden in the telling of this tale. For the later editors who put the book of Genesis in its final
form, more is now known and less is concealed. They cannot help telling how the whole history of Israel
follows the plot of Joseph, and so when the church gets its hands on this material, does it not see that Christ is
found around every corner. It is the story of Jesus even as it was the story of Joseph. Sold by his brothers.
Suffering as the innocent on behalf of the guilty. Went down to Egypt. Came up out of Egypt, as Hosea
prophesied with his words, “Our of Egypt I have called my son” (Hosea 11:1; Matthew 2:15).

But there is also much perplexing about the victory of our former victim. The pressures to conform to the
culture of Egypt were strong, and even though Joseph resisted the allurements of Potiphar’s wife, he scarcely
escaped the practices of imperial power in his dispensing of food during the famine. When telling this part of
the story, the text leaves a chilling impression:

13 Now 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. 14 Joseph 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. 15 When 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." And
Joseph answered, "Give me your livestock, and I will give you food in exchange for your livestock, if your money
is gone." 17 So 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. 18
When 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. 19 Shall 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." 20 So 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. 21 As for the people, he made slaves of them from one end of Egypt to the other. 22 Only 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. 23 Then 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. 24 And 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." 25 They said, "You have saved our lives; may it please my lord, we will be slaves to Pharaoh." 26 So 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 (Genesis 47:13-27).

Consider the words, “As for the people, he made slaves of them from one end of Egypt to the other” (47:21). His exemption of the priests (47:22) suggests an uncomfortable favoritism toward members of a privileged class within Egyptian society. How are we to justify the use of food as an instrument for exploitation, oppression, and slavery? Is not the God of Joseph’s ancestors the One who feeds the hungry and opens his gracious hands to release abundance for his creatures? For the sake of food, the citizens lose their freedom — all under the direction of the dream-interpreter who reveals the mysteries of God to Pharaoh. Would it not appear that Joseph wants to have it both ways: favor for his family and servitude for everyone else? He takes up the cause of Pharaoh with a vengeance, implementing a tax and tenant system that privileges the empire over its people. Had Joseph peered into the future beyond the immediate horizon of surplus and famine, he would have seen the covenant God of Israel give the Torah with moral requirements that denied permission to sell citizens to the royal house (Leviticus 25:25-55). He would also see that the lessons learned from managing the famine one day translate into servitude, not for Egyptians, but for Hebrews — his own descendants (Exodus 5:5-19), requiring Yahweh to rise up in righteous judgment against the house of Pharaoh demanding that he “let my people go.” No doubt the late editors of our text had this perspective and offered a counter-interpretation of Joseph’s actions by including such detail as is found in chapter 47.

Brueggemann remarks:

Questions might usefully be raised about the ways in which a vast economic apparatus keeps its promises and what the costs and hazards are. The people of promise might ask if there are alternatives to imperial modes of nourishment (cf. Mark 8:15; John 6:35).4

Some victories are short-lived, and reading the Joseph story without paying close attention to the social critique present in chapter 47, gives us a far too sanitized version of his life. While we honor his efforts on behalf of his family and the courage he showed in the face of imperial intimidation (prison and all), still there are moments we wonder if Joseph forgot that he was a Hebrew with a national dream that went far beyond the exigencies of life in Egypt. The true shape of his victory stretched far into the future when his people, settled in their land, would begin the important work of building a just society where law and gospel would one day transform the harsh economic realities into the promise of life more abundant. As with all the great heroes of the Bible, Joseph depends on his descendents for the promised fulfillment. Or, as the writer of the Hebrews once reflected:

39 Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40 since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect (Hebrews 11:39-40).

Among “all these” we include Joseph, the young, oftentimes brash, son of Jacob. His story is a sign that points the way, even if his imperial choices raise more questions than they answer. He reminds us that it is possible to live within the empire, blessing others in the process, accepting the humiliation of temporary defeat, and learning the lessons that eventually bring us all to the kingdom of God.

4 Brueggemann, Genesis, 356.
Was Joseph a hero? Perhaps. To hear him tell it, I suspect the story plays out differently. The blessing of his father on his young son, the son of his favored wife, became a heavy burden for him. His royal coat was the symbol of the intended role he was to play within the patriarchal family. It also signified the drama of this child who neither asked for the favor nor particularly sought it. Naively, perhaps, Joseph tells of his dreams to brothers and father. A source of delight to him they provoked the fiercest fraternal hatred and even gave Jacob pause when the dreams drew him into their orbit. It's not easy living with a dreamer. At first, Joseph's feet could barely touch the ground, in this, his newfound role. Wandering around looking for his brothers, he comes face to face with his inexperience and his need for "the man" who meets him there and points the way to what becomes his date with destiny. Then the agony begins: plot, pit, Potiphar, and prison. Hardly the scenes of the favored life! In time, the drama of this gifted child reveals the larger purposes of the God who intends to restore a fractured family and use Joseph as the instrument of blessing not only to it but also to the world. A hero? Perhaps. But not by his own estimation. It is true that heroes are mostly made and rarely born. And it is also true that Joseph was "made" by God's guiding hand into the "instrument of His peace".

We cannot neglect the recurring words "God was with Joseph". Herein lies his importance: God was with him. Whatever else we make of his psychological transformation or his social adaptations, we must not allow those observations to detract from the spiritual formation of a young man willing to accept the word of God heard in his dreams. To this he surrendered his will. Not to his brother's will, nor to the wife of Potiphar, and not even to Pharaoh. In the end, Joseph was at home with God. True, he lived in Egypt until his death. He remained a sojourner, like his fathers before him to the land of Canaan. But the dreams pointed always to the future, and Joseph never lost that perspective, even at the moment of his death: "God will visit you", he assured them. Nor was this hope rooted in some wishful thought, but in the oath of God: "God swore to Abraham, Isaac and to Jacob" (50:24).

When Jacob determined to honor the firstborn of his favored wife, he no doubt acted from his own purposes. Joseph came to see that act differently. Recall his words to his brothers "You intended evil; God intended good". Joseph might also have thought of his father: "You intended your good; God intended his good". For himself, Joseph imagined no less. Whatever he might purpose for himself would at last fall under the good purposes of God. God interpreted dreams. God gave Joseph wisdom. God caused his work in Egypt to succeed. So then, who is the real hero here? The story ends with an embalmed Joseph, in a coffin, in Egypt. But the great drama signaled by Joseph's life does not end. God, Israel's true hero, waits patiently for the next amazing act, which would unfold at a time when "there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph" (Exodus 1:8). That's the plain fact about human heroes: they are quickly forgotten, as Joseph would be by the royal court of Pharaoh. But God would not forget, nor would any one of his good promises to Joseph fail. And so it is with us. The life of Joseph is dedicated to his Hero, the God who was with him.

Glory to God! Amen.

Further Notes: An Ancient Tribute to Joseph
Sometime during the third century CE, an unknown Christian thinker compiled a fictional work known as the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs. And while we cannot ascribe to it any particular historical value, it remains a written witness to how one generation of Christians looked at the famous sons of Jacob. Of course, there is a tribute to the life of Joseph in its pages. Below is an excerpt from that section in which Joseph is said to speak about his life. We cannot claim these words as his own, but we can accept them as the interpretation of his life as seen through fresh eyes in the 3rd century:

"I have seen in my life envy and death, and I wandered not in the truth of the Lord. These my brethren hated me, and the Lord loved me: they wished to slay me, and the God of my fathers guarded me: they let me down into a pit, and the Most High brought me up again: I was sold for a slave, and the Lord made me free: I was taken into captivity, and His strong hand saved me: I was kept in hunger, and the Lord Himself nourished me: I was alone, and God comforted me: I was sick, and the Most High visited me: I was in prison, and the Savior showed favor to me; in bonds, and He released me; amid slanders, and He pleaded my cause; amid bitter words of the Egyptians, and He rescued me; amid envy and guile, and He exalted me."