

**Notes on Genesis 9:
A Family Reconciled
(The “Story of Joseph” in Genesis 37-50)
Fretheim Explores Genesis,
Luther Productions, St. Paul, 2000**

God Behind the Scenes in the Reconciliation of the Brothers

- ◆ The story of Joseph involves conflicts among the sons of Jacob. Eventually, the story leads to reconciliation among them.
- ◆ The story is less episodic than previous stories in Genesis, almost a small novel. There is more character development.
- ◆ God appears only once (to Jacob in chapter 46). God is at work, but behind the scenes.
- ◆ Later in the Bible we hear of the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” – but interestingly, not the “God of Abraham, ... , Joseph.” Perhaps this is because God never appears to Joseph

The Passing On of the Faith, the Promise of the Covenant

- ◆ Jacob passes on the promise to Joseph (rather than God)
- ◆ Joseph passes on the promise to all the brothers (Genesis 50:24)

Which Brother Will God Choose to Carry on the Line of Promise?

- ◆ In previous stories, God chose: Jacob rather than Esau, Isaac rather than Ishmael
- ◆ Here no one of the brothers is lifted up by God as the heir to the promise. All the sons will become leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel.
- ◆ In other words, we are seeing the transition: “Israel as Jacob becomes Israel as a people.”
- ◆ Ultimately, the line of promise continues with Judah, the fourth born of the family

The Egyptians in the Story of Joseph

- ◆ Story of Joseph leads into the Book of Exodus.

- ◆ One purpose: explains how the Hebrew got in Egypt in the first place.
- ◆ Note in the Story of Joseph, the Egyptians are presented as a kindly people, and the Pharaoh viewed in a positive light.

“God does not perfect people before God decides to work in and through them.”

- ◆ The story of Joseph is a story of a family fraught with tensions among the brothers.
- ◆ The chosen family is thus like many families, and so connects with families down through the ages.
- ◆ “God does not perfect people before God decides to work in and through them.”
- ◆ Echoing Paul in 1 Corinthians, “God chooses to work through the weak in the world, and those who are not so wise, those who don’t consider themselves so perfect, . . . in order to claim the world.” -- even though it may besmirch God’s own reputation.

The Relationship Between Family and Nation

- ◆ Joseph is a member of a family, and a leader of a government.
- ◆ The text discusses the “symbiotic relationship between government and family” embodied in Joseph.
- ◆ Effect of government on citizens should be like the effect of a good family system.
- ◆ Wide leadership in both families and in governments may be necessary to bring the good order necessary for life and well-being.
- ◆ Joseph is lifted up in this story for his wise actions in a way Abraham and Jacob were not. Joseph is concerned not only about his own family, but is also concerned about the broader world, and his actions reflect both these concerns.

God Behind the Scenes in the Work of Joseph

- ◆ God is behind the scenes, “working in and through the wise leadership of Joseph,” “weaving threads of goodness.”
- ◆ God’s presences here is not overpowering, filling the stories with miracles, oracles.

A Blessing for All the Families of the Earth

- ◆ The promise to Abraham was that his descendants will be a blessing to all the families of the world

- ◆ Here we see the chosen people as a blessing not merely *spiritually* for the families of the earth – but a blessing for their *physical needs*

The Story of Creation and the Story of Joseph: Bookends for Genesis

- ◆ The focus in the story of Joseph once again expands to embrace the entire world.
- ◆ The wise leadership of Joseph makes the world more like what God intended in the beginning, spreading goodness throughout God's creation.
- ◆ Creation themes are also central: family order, global social and economic crises, the preservation of life and well-being of God's world

Joseph's Role in the Genuine Reconciliation of the Brothers (Chapter 50)

- ◆ Jacob dies in chapter 50. The brothers must renegotiate their relationship.
- ◆ Joseph has the power to exact revenge. Instead, he assures his brothers he does not stand above them, : “Am I in the Place of God?”
 - He may not explicitly offer them forgiveness, for that might appear to place himself on a moral high-ground. His primary goal may instead be to demonstrate his basic moral equality with them.

God Can Work Good in the Midst of Evil

- ◆ Genesis 50:20: Joseph tells his brothers: “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.”:
- ◆ And earlier in Genesis 45:8: Joseph tells his brothers: “So it was not you who sent me here [Egypt], but God . . .”
- ◆ Two temptations in interpreting this text:
 - Deism God removed from the life of the world, not involved at all
 - God micro-manages. God has God's finger in every pie and has control over everything. God is the only effective actor.
- ◆ Neither interpretation works in Genesis. The sins of Joseph's brothers are real and liable, not the actions of puppets.
- ◆ “God can take up even people's sinful and evil actions, and piece these actions into a larger “quilt” of God's purposes for God's people. So God can work good in the midst of evil, God can work life in the midst of death to bring about God's good purposes. God good purposes will not be finally stymied...”
- ◆ “God does not have a detailed plan about relationships among human beings. . . What people do and say counts.”

- ◆ Human actions and words are important to God. God takes up human actions and words, and works with them to work goodness in God's creation.

References

- ◆ 1. Video series: **Fretheim Explores Genesis**. Luther Productions. St. Paul. 2000. (Available from: <http://www.lutherproductions.com/bibleseries.htm>)
- ◆ 2. "The Book of Genesis. Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." Terence E. Fretheim. In: **The New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Volume I**. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1994.