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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

UNIT 9: JOSEPH

BIBLICAL TEXT:

Read Genesis chapters 37, 39-50 carefully before reading the following background information.

TEXTBOOK READINGS:

Read chapter 2 “Joseph” in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

There are a number of areas in which history and archeology add to our understanding of the story of Joseph, and in this section we will look at some of these points of contact. We know that Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers and taken to Egypt by Midianite traders (see Note 1). In the ancient Near East slaves were usually prisoners of war or victims of slave-raiding, but traders often bought and sold slaves, whom they transported to areas around the fertile crescent. Genesis 37:26 tells us the traders paid 20 shekels of silver for Joseph, which is known to have been the price of slaves in the period of time when Joseph would have lived. By the time of Moses, who wrote down the account, or at the even later time some critics of the Bible suggest the Joseph story was written, slave prices were two or three times higher.

Biblical critics have frequently denied the historicity of the Joseph account on the basis that it would be “unlikely” that a foreign slave could ever rise to great power in Egypt. But this is to ignore the special circumstances that Genesis clearly elaborates, and to be ignorant of many discoveries of Egyptian archaeology. We have evidence of a number of Semitic individuals who rose to considerable power in Egypt (see Note 2) and many examples of individuals of lowly status being promoted to high levels.

The fact that “no evidence” exists of Joseph as an actual Egyptian high official does not mean anything. In the 1980’s the tomb of a previously unknown New Kingdom vizier of Egypt (whose position was directly under that of the Pharaoh – just as Joseph is said to have been) was discovered in Saqqara in Egypt. This powerful vizier, named Aper-el, was also a Semite and was buried in an un-Egyptian, Semitic manner along with his family members – just as Jacob and Joseph had chosen to be (Genesis 49:29; 50:25). If the existence of a person as powerful as Aper-el could be unknown to modern historians until the recent discovery of his tomb, it is hardly significant that we do not at this time have specific archaeological proof of Joseph – whose importance was comparable to that of Aper-el (especially as Joseph probably lived in the relatively less documented Second Intermediate Period of Egyptian history, c. 1786-1570 BC).

We also have archaeological evidence of groups of Semitic people travelling to Egypt for trade or to settle in difficult times – just as we read was the case with Joseph’s brothers and eventually his whole family (Genesis 47:1). The illustration below is from a Middle Kingdom (the period directly before the probable time of Joseph) scene painted in an Egyptian tomb at Beni Hassan and shows a group of Western Semitic people arriving in Egypt (the two figures at the top right are Egyptians).



Tomb painting of Semitic people arriving in Egypt, Beni Hassan c. 1890 BC. Image: Archival

Finally, it is known that large numbers of Semitic people settled in the fertile Egyptian Delta region – where Genesis tells us the Israelites settled in Egypt – in times of drought and famine in Canaan, and specifically in the period in which Genesis indicates Joseph and his family went there. These Semitic peoples reached their greatest numbers in Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period (c. 1700-1500 BC) when Joseph seems to have lived. In fact, so many Semites were present in Egypt at this time that the Delta region was actually controlled by local rulers of Syro-Palestinian origin. In other words, the conditions and political situation revealed by Egyptian archaeology in this period are exactly those described by Genesis and the Joseph story in particular.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

Dreams play an important role throughout the Joseph story – first the dreams of the young Joseph that get him into trouble, and then the dreams of others that he later interprets that get him out of trouble! Dreams in the ancient world were thought to provide information from the divine realm and were therefore taken very seriously. But dreams were often filled with symbols that needed to be interpreted, and many Near Eastern cultures had priests who were responsible for dream interpretation. In the Joseph story, Pharaoh’s magicians are called “interpreters of dreams” (Genesis 41:8; 24), and in Genesis 40:8

the two officials imprisoned with Joseph lament that they had dreams “and there is no one to interpret them.” Joseph served as the “dream interpreter” for the two officials, as he did for Pharaoh a few years later (Genesis 41:15-36), and this gift from God was the basis, of course, of Joseph’s promotion to second in command under Pharaoh – and the basis of the second part of the new name, “Zaphnath-Paaneah,” given to Joseph by Pharaoh. The first part of that name as recorded in Genesis means “Overseer of the Storehouse of Abundance,” and the second part probably means “He of excellent spirit/intellect” (see Genesis 41:38) – both names that applied perfectly to Joseph’s situation.

Perhaps significantly, when Joseph later revealed himself to his brothers (Genesis 45), he did not mention his position as Overseer of the Storehouse of Abundance, but chose to refer to himself by three other titles: “... a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and ruler throughout the land of Egypt” (Genesis 45:8). These three titles are all well-known among the very highest ranking Egyptian officials, and the title “Father to Pharaoh” is particularly interesting as it was subtly changed by Joseph from the Egyptian “Father of the god” (meaning Pharaoh) – showing a clear knowledge of Egyptian titles as well as the religious sensitivity of Joseph himself.

The other Egyptian names found in the Joseph account – those of Joseph’s master, Potiphar (Genesis 39:1); Joseph’s wife, Asenath (Genesis 41:45); and his father-in-law, Potiphara (Genesis 41:45) – are all understandable as good ancient Egyptian names. Likewise, the details of Joseph’s investiture by Pharaoh (the signet ring, neck-chain, and special linen robe, as well as the official chariot escort that Genesis 41:42-43 tells us were given to Joseph by the Pharaoh are exactly the insignia of office of the highest ranking Egyptians) and other aspects of the account all demonstrate that the author of this story had extensive knowledge of the Egyptian culture and especially the royal court – as Moses, who was raised in Pharaoh’s household, did (Acts 7:22).

Another historical reference that helps us understand the text in this section of Genesis is that the marriage arranged for Joseph (Genesis 41:45) allied him with one of the most powerful priestly families in Egypt. The city called “On” in some translations of the Bible was the great city of Heliopolis – the center of the sun-cult in Egypt that served the sun god Re or Ra. Marriage into this priestly family both “normalized” his new citizenship and also helped to keep the delicate balance of political and religious power in ancient Egypt.

An even smaller yet meaningful detail we might notice in the text that is rooted in the reality of the time is that in the great meal Joseph provided for his brothers, the servants separately served Joseph, his brothers, and the Egyptians. This is because ancient Egypt was one of, if not the leading culture of the ancient world and the Egyptians considered peoples of other cultures to be barbarians. As a result, the Egyptians would not eat at the same table as the foreigners, and Joseph’s place was separated from both the Egyptians and the visiting Israelites because of his elevated rank. The details of this type found throughout the Joseph story clearly and continually support the account’s veracity.

A final detail to be aware of in this section of Genesis is the way in which Jacob, on settling in Egypt, adopts Joseph’s two sons as his own (Genesis 48). This was not only a mark of affection on the part of Jacob, but was also a concrete way in which he could transfer two portions of his sons’ inheritance to Joseph – and so give Joseph the double portion of the inheritance due to the firstborn, as we saw in unit 8 of this course.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

The importance of the account of Joseph is seen in that Genesis devotes far more space to it than the stories of Adam or Noah and as much space as is given to Abraham. Although God does not appear directly to Joseph as he did to some of the earlier figures, we see God behind the ongoing circumstances described in the Joseph story more than any other in Genesis. We learn a great deal, in fact, about how God works in human lives and situations throughout Joseph's story, culminating in the great expression of God's providence spoken by Joseph himself: "it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you" (Genesis 45:5), and "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20). Perhaps nowhere else in the Bible is this theological concept more clearly illustrated.

Another thing we see relative to God in this story is that throughout the whole account when God's actions are recorded, the word used for God is the Hebrew word Yahweh – which we saw in unit 3 is used to refer to God's personal attributes and his personal relationship with humans. On the other hand, whenever Joseph speaks about God – whether to Potiphar's wife, to those imprisoned with him, to Pharaoh, or to his own brothers, he uses the word Elohim – the name associated with the power and majesty of God. In this small detail we see the reality of Joseph's continued respectful attitude toward God and God's continued personal care for him (Genesis 39:21; etc.).

But if Joseph's story teaches us important lessons about God, it also teaches us a great many things about life in general, and especially about the failings of human nature and the possibility of rising above them. The Joseph account is full of insights into interpersonal – especially family – relationships, and Joseph himself is a figure of righteous character.

It is interesting that, with the possible exception of a youthful lack of discretion in telling his brothers about his dreams (though he was evidently a young teenager at that time and could hardly be expected to act wisely regarding the exciting revelations given to him), nothing negative is said about Joseph throughout his whole life story. Among the characters who are discussed in detail, Joseph is unique in this regard up to this point in the Bible.

Joseph exhibited a great many positive qualities, and his life story exhibits many applied theological principles. His great patience and perseverance are evident throughout the account (see the assigned textbook reading), and many of his other characteristics, such as his forgiveness, are so striking that it is not difficult to see why later biblical writers held up Joseph as a benchmark. At many points in 1 Samuel, for example, David is shown to be a type of Joseph, and many Christians have long seen Joseph as an Old Testament type of Christ himself (see Note 3).

Perhaps no quality of Joseph was more important, however, than his faithfulness, which we see expressed continually toward God and toward others – especially in the special situation of his own family. Despite the many difficult events of his life (being sold into slavery, falsely accused of rape by Potiphar's wife, imprisoned for years, and left forgotten in prison for two more years by the chief cupbearer), Joseph was faithful and never questioned God's will. Likewise, when things went well (sometimes an even harder test for people), Joseph continued in his faithful relationship with God. The way in which Joseph cited faithfulness to God in refusing to give in to seduction (Genesis 39:9) and the way in which he continually gave credit to God (Genesis 40:8; 41:16; etc.) are just some examples of his faithfulness in this area.

Joseph was likewise faithful to others – as we see in his obedience to his father’s requests (Genesis 37:12-17), his refusal to betray the trust Potiphar had placed in him (Genesis 39:8), and, of course, his faithfulness to his family – even when most of his siblings had betrayed him (Genesis 50:15-18). Not only did Joseph not resort to revenge when he had opportunity, but he blessed his brothers and treated them with love (Genesis 50:19-21). We see that faithfulness based on love in dozens of details of the story – such as when the brothers returned to Canaan to fetch Jacob and Joseph urged them not to be angry (Genesis 45:5; Habakkuk 2:3; etc.; rather than “do not fear” as in many English translations) and punish themselves on account of what they had done to him (Genesis 45:24). Even after their father Jacob died and the brothers realized there was nothing now holding Joseph back from punishing them, we see Joseph’s total faithfulness toward them (Genesis 50:15-21). Few characters in the Old Testament teach us about faithfulness as much as Joseph.

* Note 1: There may seem to be a contradiction between Genesis 37:28 which says the Ishmaelites sold Joseph in Egypt and Genesis 37:36 which says the Midianites sold him there, but the Hebrew of this verse literally says that they sold him “toward Egypt” meaning they were involved in the overall process.

* Note 2: For example, the Semitic New Kingdom Egyptian official named Bay who was given the title “Great Chancellor of the Entire Land” – directly reminiscent of the power invested in Joseph (Genesis 41:41).

* Note 3: The similarities between the lives of Joseph and Jesus are many. A few of the ones commonly cited include: they were beloved of their father, it was foretold that they would rule, they were not recognized by their people, mocked by their families, sent by their father to seek their brothers’ welfare, both were sold by one of twelve named Judah (Judas in Greek), they were sold for pieces of silver, stripped of their robes, delivered up to the Gentiles, falsely accused, numbered with wrongdoers, thrown into prison, they stood before rulers, embraced God’s will even though it brought them physical harm, they were the instrument God used to bless his people, and it was decreed that people must bow the knee before them.

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics:

What are some of the archaeological discoveries that throw light on the story of Joseph?

What seems to be the most important quality exhibited in the life of Joseph?

What are some examples of Joseph staying faithful to God although he was living in a pagan culture?

Looking Below the Surface:

Why might God have chosen to use dreams so much in the life of Joseph?

Everyday Applications: How can you better apply one of the qualities exhibited by Joseph in your own life?

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