

Session 8: Explanations of Evil and Suffering

F. Joseph: 'God meant it for good'

Activity 8.9

Read again Genesis 37, 39-48, 50

Recall from your childhood, or from popular presentations like 'Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat, what you have understood the main message of the Joseph story to be.

What can you discern to be the main features of the story, seeing it as an example of Israel's wisdom tradition?

We have learned in the previous sections that in several cases the Old Testament presents God not only tolerating evil and suffering but using it to accomplish his purpose. The Joseph story is another example: here we see God's providence in control throughout and bringing good out of evil.

We have already seen in the previous session that the Joseph story has several connections with the wisdom tradition. In some respects it is a political document similar to the succession narrative. The story explains how Israel came to be in Egypt, from which they were delivered at the Exodus. It is firmly based in the history of the period 1650 – 1540 B.C., when Semitic peoples moved into the Nile Delta and some of them were employed at court by various of the Pharaohs. The story also demonstrates inside knowledge of the Egyptian court and culture.

The Joseph story is not like the traditions of the other patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is not made up of several incidents pieced together, as they are, but forms one connected story with a complicated, closely worked plot and deep psychological insight into the characters. Like the succession narrative, it displays a deep interest in act and consequence, especially judgement on sin. It shows God acting through human decisions, including sinful ones, to achieve his purpose. Also like the succession narrative, this is the story of how a younger son came to rule over his elders, and like the succession narrative it presents absolute monarchy in a favourable light. So although there is no certainty, it is possible that this story too was one of the products of Solomon's court.

It is important too for its insights into suffering:

- The story insists that the Lord is 'with' Joseph even when his fortunes are at their lowest (four times in chapter 39, verses 2,5,21,23). Even as a slave and in prison he is a 'successful man' and the lord shows him 'steadfast love'.
- Joseph demonstrates righteousness under trial. He accepts innocent suffering with patience. Faced with temptation he refuses to 'sin against God' (39:9).
- Partly as a result, his character matures. He grows from spoilt brat to patient side man.
- The story illustrates the ways sins can come back to haunt you. In 42:21 the brothers say to each other, 'We are paying the penalty for what we did ...' and this is even more true than they realise.

- It also shows that God's providence can appear good or bad, depending on your conscience. When the brothers first discover the returned money in their sacks they say, 'What has God done to us now?' (42:28) When they try to explain to Joseph's steward, he responds, 'Don't worry: I expect God put it there for you' (43:23).
- Finally, the story shows God at work even in people's sin. The climax of the story comes when Joseph meets his brothers and tells them, 'Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here for God sent me before you to preserve life ... So it was not you who sent me here, but God' (45:5-8). and again, in 50:20, 'Though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good ...'

Perhaps in the Joseph story God is not directly the author of suffering, but like Jeremiah and Israel in Lamentations, he allows it to mould his servants and to bring his purposes about.