

## FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION FOR THE SAKE OF THE KINGDOM: AN ESCHATOLOGICAL IMAGINING OF JOSEPH'S STORY

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The story of Joseph in Genesis is undoubtedly one of the most dramatic narratives in the Bible. It stirs the imagination. Anyone can relate to Joseph's painful experience of betrayal by those he was supposed to trust and his emotional movement towards reconciliation. Little wonder, then, this story had been adapted into numerous movies and theatrical plays. But, of course, this story serves more than to entertain readers or to be appreciated. As Gordon Wenham argues, Old Testament narrative books have a didactic purpose.<sup>2</sup> The story, after all, is part of the *Torah*, which means "instruction." Kevin Vanhoozer helpfully elaborates,

The point of narrative is not merely to assert "this happened, and then this happened." Narratives make another kind of claim altogether: "Look at the world like this." Narratives do more than chronicle; they *configure*.<sup>3</sup>

Imagination, then, plays an essential role in enabling biblical narratives to function as normative to the ever-changing situations of God's people. To put it in another way, those who lack imagination would only be able to see unrelated parts, which in turn would mean they would have a difficult time synthesizing the life of the contemporary church into a very different world articulated in the text. The consequence of this inability would be tragic, because the Word demands to be embodied (Jn 6:63; Eph 4:20–24; 2 Ti 3:16). But before carving out a pathway of configuring Joseph's narrative in terms of forgiveness and reconciliation, two aspects of the textual landscape

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<sup>2</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *The Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: John Knox Westminster, 2005), 282. See also *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 94; *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition: Scenes of the Church's Worship, Witness, and Wisdom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 134; and Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (New York: HarperOne, 1996), 295.

must first be recognized because they vastly shape the contours of this exploration.

First, a position on the sticky question of authorship of the Pentateuch should be made clear. Making a quick survey of this landscape, one would immediately get the impression that one is stepping onto a minefield with two camps making aggressive claims of dire consequences lest they be ignored. On the one side, there are Jewish and Christian traditional views that confess Moses to be the author. They base this claim on scriptural references to his literary activities. If one allows for another author besides Moses, one might be labeled a heretic for questioning Scripture's authority.<sup>4</sup> With the rise of the the Enlightenment Age this warning had lost its effect. Scholars began to construe authorship in the usual modern sense and treated Genesis strictly as an historical problem. Over time, since Julius Wellhausen, theoretical developments of separate JEDP sources grew, demonstrating that Moses could not have penned majority or any of the five books we have today. For over two hundred years these studies became so dominant that if one were to ignore the pieces of evidence presented, one could be labeled naïve or arrogant. So, what is one to do?

Fortunately, another transition began to take place in studies on the Pentateuch. Critical studies were by no means monolithic and grew quite convoluted. The Pentateuch had been broken down into so many pieces and in so many ways that scholars by the 1970s began to question how helpful these fragmentations were for understanding the whole text, not to mention for the life of the church. It was then a rising number of scholars began to call for a recovery to focus on the overall canon as received today. Since then, many scholars responded by taking a more literary approach to analyze Genesis, focusing on *the world of the text*, rather than *the world behind the text*, and thereby putting compositional issues to the side or at least acknowledging them in brackets. Brevard Childs rightly argued that even if many redactions could confidently be highlighted, Mosaic authorship still plays an important role theologically, which had been the point all along.<sup>5</sup> What this means for this imaginative project, in the sense that Vanhoozer set forth, is that the canon we have today is no less authoritative, and Moses' Exodus context still plays an important theological role as an interpretive sinew between Joseph's story and the life of the church.

The second aspect of the landscape to survey before carving out a path is considering the purpose of Genesis. There is not necessarily one obvious answer to this multivalent question and several avenues have been taken.

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<sup>4</sup> The Pentateuch narrates several times God commanding Moses to write down the Torah into a book with Moses obeying that command (Ex 17:14; 24:4; 34:27; Nm 33:1-2; Dt 31:9-11); the rest of the Old Testament refers to the book of the Torah as "of Moses" or abbreviating that to "the book of Moses" (Josh 8:31-32; 1 Kgs 2:3; 2 Ki 14; 2 Ch 25:4; Ez 6:18; Neh 13:1; Da 9:11-13; Mal 4:4); the New Testament likewise refers to the "book of Moses" or assumes his authorship in passing (Mt 19:8; Mk 12:26; Jn 5:45-47; Acts 15:1; Ro 10:5; 1 Co 9:9; 2 Co 3:15).

<sup>5</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 134-135.

But we seek brevity. So if we assume Mosaic authorship, even if only on a theological level, then it is possible to narrow down Genesis' purpose by adopting Richard Pratt's argument: "Moses wrote the book of Genesis to teach his readers that leaving Egypt and possessing Canaan was God's design for Israel."<sup>6</sup> One could trace this motif throughout the book from the creation narrative all the way to Joseph's story. More specifically for the latter, Pratt expanded his argument: "The interaction among tribal patriarchs in the Joseph story established proper inter-tribal relations in Moses' day and assured Israel of her destiny in Canaan."<sup>7</sup> What we can see here is an eschatological spin to reading the ethics of Joseph's story. The narrative reminds us that there is a future to think about. Therefore, what can be inferred is that forgiveness and reconciliation impact not only the immediate healing of *individuals* involved but also the welfare and harmony of present and future *communities* heading together toward a more glorious world according to God's purposes.

This eschatological imagining, then, can be summarized as such: Joseph's story teaches the church that forgiveness and reconciliation are essential parts of building the kingdom of God that Christ inaugurated and will eventually consummate. This may seem obvious at first glance, but it presents a weighty factor not often considered when discussing the motivation for forgiveness and reconciliation. A vast majority of what had been written on the two topics tend to focus on benefits they offer for the well-being of the individual such as improved mental, emotional, and even physical health. Indeed, these benefits should be explored and by no means dismissed or belittled, especially since it would not be difficult to speculate that Joseph probably epitomized these ameliorations as he wrestled with forgiveness throughout his rise to power. However, reading Moses takes Western readers out of their tendency toward hyper-individualism and invites them to think also about the well-being of the community and consider steps how that might advance or delay God's mission to establish His kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

The exploration of Joseph's story can be broken down into three subsequent acts.<sup>8</sup> Each of these acts will evaluate the three-part hermeneutical process mentioned above; namely, examine (1) the narrative, (2) the Exodus paradigmatic application, and then (3) the New Exodus typological application.

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<sup>6</sup> Richard L. Pratt, Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1990), 281.

<sup>7</sup> Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories*, 281–282.

<sup>8</sup> Outline taken from Waltke, *Genesis*, 493.

I. ACT 1: IMAGINING CONFLICTS: A DYSFUNCTIONAL  
FAMILY WITH COVENANTAL HOPE  
(GENESIS 37:2–38:30)

A. CONFLICTS IN THE NARRATIVE

In Act 1 of Joseph's story—the final of the eleven instances of the *Toledoth* in Genesis—readers are immediately drawn into a dramatic scene of broken relationships torn apart by conflicts. In the larger context, Joseph's conflict with his brothers is a perpetuation of acrimonies between Leah and Rebekah. The family conflict continues to escalate among Jacob's children as they see their father loving (*ahab*) Joseph above all. The (in)famous gift of the coat of many colors given to Joseph symbolically cemented the ten brothers' inferior status when it came to their father's love. Lest we ponder incredulously how Jacob could be so blatant with such a fault, let us be reminded that this type of parenting was perpetuated as well since we can see earlier in Genesis that Isaac had shown that same favored love (*ahab*) toward Esau, and Rebekah had loved (*ahab*) Jacob more (Gn 25:28); moreover, Abraham favored Isaac over Ishmael. In this family environment, it is not surprising, then, to see what kind of child Joseph turned out to be. Meir Sternberg remarked, "God's future agent and mouthpiece in Egypt could hardly make a worse impression on his first appearance: spoiled brat, talebearer, braggart."<sup>9</sup> The unabashed love displayed between Joseph and his father was contrasted with the brothers' profound hatred (*sane*) Joseph's immature choices of revealing his dreams of future dominion over the family only served to intensify this bitter feeling within the span of four verses. The narrative mentions two more times that the brothers hated him "even more" (Gn 37:4–5, 8).

This hatred culminated in an opportunity to kill Joseph when the brothers were all alone in the fields with him. The scenario is *déjà vu* to the moment before Cain killed Abel in response to the anger he felt after seeing God favor his younger brother's sacrifice. Will history repeat itself? Given repeated generational sins mentioned above, and readers have seen Simeon and Levi's violent past (Gen 34), there is no earthly reason why it should not. The stakes are high and the consequences severe. God cursed Cain from the ground and cast him off from his presence for his deed. Could the brothers receive the same treatment if they go through with it? Readers surveying the big picture of Genesis from thirty thousand feet above the ground could stay at relative ease because the difference in the ten brothers' scenario from Cain's was that they were successors of a binding covenant given to Abraham. Abraham was promised to be made a great nation, to possess the land of Canaan, and that his children would be as numerous as the stars in the sky (Gn 12:1–3; 15:1–5; 17:1–8). In the covenantal ritual of cutting the animals in half, only the theophanies in

<sup>9</sup> Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1987), 98.

the form of a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch—symbolic previews of God’s presence in the form of smoke descending upon the tabernacle and the pillar of fire—passed through the cut bodies. God took it upon himself, relying on no one else, to ensure that the promises of the covenant would be fulfilled. Because of this covenantal foundation, Joseph himself at the end of the story gives us a theological grid through which to view this whole process of forgiveness and reconciliation: “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? 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” (Gn 50:19–20).

Bruce Waltke observed, in retrospect, that God’s providence unfolds through series of events happening at just the right time.<sup>10</sup> Joseph arrived at Shechem where Jacob had sent him to report on his brothers, but the brothers happened to move onto Dothan, causing Joseph delay, wandering the field in search of them.<sup>11</sup> Then a man who could help happened to find Joseph. He could help because he happened to overhear where the brothers were heading. As Joseph drew near at the same time the brothers in sight of him were discussing how they would kill him, a caravan of Ishmaelite merchants happened to come along. It occurred to Judah to sell Joseph into slavery, rather than kill him, and Joseph happened to end up in Egypt. Without any supernatural events to intervene in the narrative, Genesis, nonetheless, makes clear through the timing of all these circumstances that conflicts remain under the purview of God’s care and sovereignty.

## B. CONFLICTS IN THE EXODUS

Let us pause the narrative to imagine how conflicts examined in Joseph’s story are significant to Moses’ context in terms of the inevitability of conflicts, assurance of the covenants, and providence. From the time of the Fall, broken relationships of the patriarchs passed down to the Israelites. The Abrahamic covenant implied that there would be no way around conflicts when God told Abraham, “Him who dishonors you I will curse” (Gn 12:3). It is not a matter of if others will dishonor Israel, but when. The very given name of Israel translated “wrestles with God,” suggests that this chosen nation would be destined for conflicts. But at the same time, the name could be translated “triumphant with God,” reminding them of the unfailing hope they have in the Lord to overcome any conflicts. So, the question is how should inevitable conflicts be understood and subsequently handled? In this case, Joseph’s situation with his brothers anecdotally instructed Israel that no conflict exists outside of God’s providence to ensure that his covenant would be fulfilled and to encourage the nation to trust in him.

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<sup>10</sup> Waltke, *Genesis*, 492.

<sup>11</sup> It should be highlighted that Shechem is the same place where Simeon and Levi killed all adult males in vengeance for defiling their sister Dinah (Gen 34). The narrative seems to foreshadow that history will not repeat itself. The brothers have moved on from Shechem to Dothan and Joseph shall not suffer the same fate as those killed.

One could imagine the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh being grateful for the protection their father Joseph received through providence!

In reality, however, Israel struggled to trust this assurance throughout Exodus. Arie Leder identified three major escalating conflicts Israel faced in Exodus but examining only two will suffice for our purpose here.<sup>12</sup> The first was the conflict between Yahweh and Pharaoh. The victorious master would demonstrate who is worthy of trust. Israel, in this case, was the passive observer in servitude to the oppressive power of their master Pharaoh. Yet the narrative explained that Pharaoh's iron grip was due to God hardening his heart, not allowing any confusion about just who had superior power (Ex 9:16). The conflict was finally resolved at the parting of the Red Sea where God saved his people and conquered his pursuant enemies challenging his authority. The victory confirmed the assertion of Joseph's story identifying who was the true master and reassuring who held absolute power over all things, which resulted in Israel fearing and believing in the LORD (Ex 14:31).

With God and Pharaoh's conflict resolved there arose a second conflict. As Israel developed a new relationship with God it was quickly broken down by complaints lobbed against God's mediator Moses. The people contrasted their situation in the wilderness under their current master with their former one; when confronted with lack of water at Marah and food in the Desert of Sin, they concluded they were better off Egypt (Ex 16:3). In response to Moses' intercession, God did provide food and water. "These provisions, however," Leder commented, "do not resolve the conflict between God and Israel because the real issue is not lack of sustenance but Israel's failure to submit to God's instructions."<sup>13</sup> God committed to strengthen this new relationship by making a new covenant and setting clear expectations at Mount Sinai. God went beyond answering the question of how Israel will survive outside of Egypt to making relational promises that they will be treasured possessions, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation if they maintain the covenant given and therein obey the law—a full summary of God's will (Ex 19:5–6).<sup>14</sup> Building upon the Abrahamic covenant that framed Joseph's story, and emphatically not in separation from it, the Mosaic covenant provided a tangible map to guide Israel's flourishing (Lv 26:1–12; Dt 28:1–14). Thomas Schreiner rightly observed, "The Lord doesn't begin with a demand that Israel observe these commands in order to be his people. Quite the contrary."<sup>15</sup> They already are by grace. The law

<sup>12</sup> Arie C. Leder, "The Coherence of Exodus Narrative Unity and Meaning," *Calvin Theological Journal* 36 (2001): 251–269.

<sup>13</sup> Leder, "The Coherence of Exodus," 258.

<sup>14</sup> O. Palmer Robertson argued, "A law has been written, a will has been decreed; but this law stands outside of man, demanding conformity. 'Law' as it is used in relation to the Mosaic covenant should not be defined simply as a revelation of the will of God. More specifically, law denotes an externalized summation of God's will." *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 173.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Covenant and God's Purpose for the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 61. Thus the Mosaic covenant should not be confused with the Adamic

was a gift and evidence of God's commitment to teaching his people how to thrive. Israel learned all the more the basic assurance from Joseph's story that conflicts are under the care and control of God's providence committed to fulfilling the promises of his covenants.

### C. CONFLICTS IN THE NEW EXODUS

The same lessons of embracing the inevitability of conflicts and the assurances of covenants and providence is passed down to the church in her sojourning mission to build the kingdom of God. In continuity with Israel's history, God's people in the New Testament and beyond are no strangers to conflicts: the twelve disciples bickered and debated who was the greatest among themselves (Lk 22:24), Gentile Christians rose against Jewish Christians over the daily distributions for their widows (Acts 6:1), Paul and Barnabas split over whether to receive Mark back in the ministry (Acts 15:36–41), the Corinthian church threatened to divide (1 Co 1:10), the patriarch of Constantinople and the bishop of Rome excommunicated one another (A.D. 1054), the Edict of Worms officially diverged Roman Catholics and Protestants (A.D. 1521), and the list goes invariably on. Yet Scripture resolutely holds to the fact that God is still sovereign over all these broken relationships. In a period where the hope of the kingdom is partly experienced now, but not yet fully realized, conflicts never constitute the end of the story, but the resilient church sojourns on to fulfill the *missio Dei*. Ken Sande from Peacemaker Ministries commented, "Your view of God will have a profound effect on how much you trust him. If you do not believe that he is both sovereign and good, trust will be an elusive thing."<sup>16</sup>

Like the Israelites in Exodus, trust for the church is not birthed out of blind faith, but out of God's demonstrations of fulfilling his promises. The exile set the stage for extraordinary promises to comfort the people of God, including a renewal of heart, the forgiveness of sins, the ministry of the Holy Spirit—all ending with the refrain: "I will be their God, and they will be my people" (Jr 31:33; Ez 36:26–27). God also promised that they would be united with a king to rule over them all (Ez 37:22). The new covenant, which is said to be an everlasting covenant, was committed to bring about *shalom*.

As to an event to demonstrate God's worthiness of trust, Christ fulfilled all the promises of the new covenant in his life, death, and resurrection. Fulfilling the cultic rituals of the Mosaic covenant, Christ the high priest of a better covenant made a sacrifice at the cross once and for all to accomplish propitiation (Heb 8–10; Ro 3:21–26). Both the cross and the resurrection are to the church very much like what the parting of the Red Sea was to Israel: a constant reminder of God's liberating victory over God's oppressive enemies. They are also reminders of God's goodness as a moral influence. Moreover, N. T. Wright rightfully argues that the resurrection is a signal

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covenant of works.

<sup>16</sup> Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 70.

to the world that God is making all things new as he inaugurates his kingdom.<sup>17</sup> Limited space demands only snapshots and so we need not belabor how all this is broken down with the various atonement theories and views of the resurrection along with the details of the new covenant, because it only needs to be emphasized that understanding how to face conflicts rests in the pattern of God's sovereignty manifested in the promises of the covenants and redemptive events.

## II. ACT 2: IMAGINING FORGIVENESS: FORGIVENESS DURING JOSEPH'S RISE IN EGYPT (GENESIS 39:1–41:57)

Returning to Joseph's narrative, one could easily imagine Joseph wrestling with forgiveness as he suffered falling from his status as a favored son to becoming a lowly slave, and later worse, a prisoner, all because of his brothers' betrayal. Yet Act 2 is also a story of ascension from humiliating places to heights undreamed, except he did. Act 2 contains clues that forgiveness was not just extended to his brothers but was also most likely a way of life Joseph adopted. Since the narrative or *the world of the text* does not make forgiveness an obvious theme in this section, Act 2 will be treated more like a tie-in to Act 3. It is only then an examination of the Exodus and the New Exodus will be made after these two Acts are considered together.

Some scholars argue that interpersonal forgiveness is a relatively new concept in history, and therefore if they are right one might conclude that looking for clues of forgiveness in Joseph's story would be anachronistic. Hannah Arendt in the mid-twentieth century credited Jesus as the "discoverer" of the concept of forgiveness we know today, and so argued for its usefulness for social progress from a secular point of view.<sup>18</sup> David Konstan suggested that even Jesus differed from modern forgiveness today. He argued that it was not until Immanuel Kant did "the ideology of forgiveness" move from a general sense of solidarity dealing with assuaging anger to a rich individualistic-interpersonal encounter initiating a reconciliatory exchange.<sup>19</sup> Yet Jon Coutts rightly responded, "It would seem that Konstan underappreciates both the New Testament's influence on and its resonance with contemporary concerns, but his distinction of modern from premodern and ancient emphases is apropos."<sup>20</sup> Arendt and Konstan were looking at a history of forgiveness under the lens of Western Civilization rather than *heilsgeschichte*. The ancient Greeks did not consider forgiveness as a virtue, and therefore from this perspective Jesus with his teachings on forgiveness may indeed be credited as revolutionary to the West, and Kant may have

<sup>17</sup> N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission and the Church* (New York: HarperCollins: 2008).

<sup>18</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 236–247.

<sup>19</sup> David Konstan, *Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), ix–xi.

<sup>20</sup> Jon Coutts, *A Shared Mercy: Karl Barth on Forgiveness and the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 8. See his bibliographic review of studies on forgiveness, 1–14.



indeed intensified hyper-individualistic stress on forgiveness in the modern West.<sup>21</sup> However, under an interpretation of history emphasizing God's saving acts with Jesus Christ as the central figure in redemption, forgiveness cannot be considered a new concept in the first century, because the purpose of Jesus' ministry was not to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to *fulfill* them (Mt 5:17). So, though the word "forgiveness" was not used, it should not be too much of a stretch to argue that forgiveness was likely extended in Joseph's story since he eventually did reconcile with his brothers. Forgiveness, after all, paves the way for reconciliation and it also does not require the other party of the conflict to be present. Still, the question remains: was forgiveness extended throughout Act 2? I argue it was. Consider two major clues.

First, one clue to forgiveness was the dedicated amount of *giving* Joseph made to his service to Potiphar, the keeper of the prison, and Pharaoh. In each instance, the narrative begins with a declaration that God was with Joseph along with unique insights into what that entailed. At Potiphar's house, God caused Joseph to be successful in all that he did and he found favor in Potiphar's sight (Gn 39:3–4). In prison, God "showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in sight of the keeper of the prison" (Gn 39:21). In Pharaoh's presence, Joseph explained the nature of interpreting dreams, "It is not me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer" (Gn 41:16). With every instance Joseph was presented as an agent of God's favor, first receiving it, but then extending it to his earthly masters, which led to appointments of stewardship of their respective domains.

Miroslav Volf, taking Martin Luther's observation of the nature of love, notes that the appropriate imagery for God's love is flow. He commented, "God's love does not suck out the good it finds in the others, as distorted human love does. It 'flows forth and bestows good.'"<sup>22</sup> If a person were to stop the flow, this person would only be a receiver, not a giver, and thereby cease functioning as he or she is designed to be and do, namely to image God, who is the generous giver. "And so," Volf concluded, "the flow of God's gifts shouldn't stop as soon as it reaches us. The outbound movement must continue. Indeed, in addition to making us flourish, giving to others is the very purpose for which God gave us the gifts."<sup>23</sup> Throughout Act 2, Joseph modeled this flow with consistent faithful service without holding a grudge even after different unjust situations. So, if Everett Worthington is right in identifying forgiveness as an "altruistic gift," then it would be likely to say that forgiveness came along that flow as well.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> See Charles Griswold on the ancient Greeks on forgiveness in *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1–19.

<sup>22</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 49.

<sup>23</sup> Volf, *Free of Charge*, 49.

<sup>24</sup> Everett L. Worthington, Jr., *Forgiving and Reconciling: Bridges to Wholeness and Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 113–129. He argues, "Forgiving is for giving, not for getting," 27.

Second, we do not have to speculate whether or not forgiveness traveled down the flowing river of God's blessings in Joseph's life, because the narrative stated outright that Joseph did not forget his pain but acknowledged it without any sense of grudges, bitterness, or vengeance. After Joseph was exalted to the highest authority second only to Pharaoh, he was given the daughter of the priest of On (Heliopolis in Greek, home to the cult of Ra the greatest of the Egyptian gods). Nahum Sarna noted, "The high priest of On held the exalted title 'Greatest of Seers.' Joseph thus marries into the elite of Egyptian nobility."<sup>25</sup> These flatteries, however, did not terminate Joseph's commitment to God; on the contrary, faithfulness was evidenced in praising God in the naming of his two sons. The first he called Manasseh—derived from "forget." "For," he said, "God has made me forget all my *hardship* and all my father's house" (Gn 41:51). Several commentators agree that this statement is a hendiadys for "all my trouble associated with my father's household."<sup>26</sup> The second he called Ephraim, "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my *affliction*" (Gn 41:52). From these two names, Joseph did not literally forget his pain. Even after the naming of Manasseh, the "affliction" is still recalled in the naming of Ephraim. Significantly, readers do not see Joseph ignore, excuse, minimize, tolerate, condone, or legally pardon the actions of his brothers.<sup>27</sup>

What are readers to make of Joseph's willingness to forget then? The conflict between Jacob and Esau could set a precedent to understand Joseph's decision. After Jacob stole Esau's blessing, resulting in Esau planning to kill him, Rebekah instructs him to hide and find refuge with her brother Laban. Further, she tells him, "And stay with him a while, until your brother's fury turns away—until your brother's anger turns away from you, and he *forgets* what you have done to him" (Gn 27:44–45). Jacob was not to come back home until Esau decides not to hold Jacob's action against him. The same kind of connection between forgetfulness and a releasing of penalty is attributed to God as well in other parts of Scripture. God declared to Israel, "I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will *not remember* your sins" (Is 43:25). In another place, God is more explicit about the connection between forgiveness and forgetfulness: "And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will *forgive* their iniquities, and I will *remember their sins no more*." These connections between turning away anger, releasing penalties, and forgetfulness all give light to understanding

<sup>25</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 288.

<sup>26</sup> Waltke, *Genesis*, 535; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, The New International Commentary of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: 1995), 512; and Sarna, *Genesis*, 289. Hendiadys is an expression of a single idea by two words connected with "and."

<sup>27</sup> See Charlotte vanOyen Witvliet, "Forgiveness: What It Takes and What It Gives," in *Psychology Through the Eyes of Faith*, eds. D. G. Meyers and M. Jeeves (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 2003), 140.

Joseph's active willingness to forget. The naming of Manasseh in a time of great personal flourishing and power thus indicated that Joseph too was making a decision not to penalize his brothers, which in turn is an indicator that Joseph forgave his brothers.

If it can be granted that these two clues indicate that Joseph did forgive his brothers, then it is significant to note that the result of forgiveness did not only focus on Joseph's well-being but also the flourishing and harmony of the social order. Psychologically speaking, clinical studies showed that unforgiving people break down social harmony. Charlotte Witvliet observed, "[Unforgiving] people...feel more anxious, depressed, and inferior than forgiving people."<sup>28</sup> There is usually a connection between unforgiveness and hostility; it is not surprising, then, that observations showed that "hostile people often lack social support."<sup>29</sup> Thus with these traits, it is concluded that unforgiving people tend to be less productive in society. Joseph for his part, however, consistently gained favor and built a strong social support. As the naming of Ephraim reminds readers, Joseph was indeed afflicted, yet he was consistently fruitful throughout his time stewarding Potiphar's house, prison, and the nation of Egypt. Forgiveness as a way of life blessed those around Joseph. It would not be surprising if Joseph struggled to forgive in reality, but readers are not privy to his innermost thoughts because at this point, they are only given an idealized portrait of Joseph. He is the bookend of Genesis to give flesh to the bones of the *imago Dei's* cultural mandate (Gn 1:28). He was blessed, then he became fruitful, blessing those whom he served; he multiplied his progeny, but also his productivity; he subdued the problem of famine confronting Egypt and the known world; ultimately, he exercised dominion. What must not be missed is that Joseph's fulfillment of his role as an *imago Dei* includes the social dimension: forgiveness as a way of life made way for a prospering culture, a society of well-being—what the Old Testament calls *shalom*. As Worthington stated, "If we forgive, our entire community might focus less on revenge, avoidance, unforgiveness and past problems and focus more on future possibilities."<sup>30</sup>

### III. ACT 3: IMAGINING RECONCILIATION: THE DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY RECONCILED (GENESIS 42:1–46:27)

#### A. RECONCILIATION IN THE NARRATIVE

In Act 3 the narrative brings the ten brothers back into the story as they travel to Egypt to buy grain. Could Joseph's life of giving that resulted in blessing the world extend to those who had harmed him? The plot thickens. Though Joseph was able to thrive in Egypt and bless the nation because he was able to forgive, forgiveness does not mean that the relationship with

<sup>28</sup> Witvliet, "Forgiveness," 142.

<sup>29</sup> Witvliet, "Forgiveness," 142.

<sup>30</sup> Worthington, *Forgiving and Reconciling*, 26.

the brothers was no longer toxic, even after a long time. There was still a matter of repairing broken trust. Worthington defined reconciliation as, “[Restoring] trust in a relationship in which trust has been damaged...It is not granted but earned.”<sup>31</sup> In recognizing them without the brothers reciprocating that recognition, this was an opportunity for Joseph to create schemes to test them whether they had truly repented.

In the first test, he spoke roughly to them just like they could not speak peacefully to him when they were all together in Canaan (Gn 37:11; 42:7). Several times he accused them of being spies. But John Sailhamer rejected the notion that Joseph was exacting revenge on them because of the narration: “And Joseph remembered the dreams that he had dreamed of them” (Gn 42:9), which advised readers of Joseph’s true motivation.<sup>32</sup> The brothers insisted on being honest men, adding that they are twelve brothers with the youngest one still at home with their father, and one is no more—a stunning admission that they did not need to make, but a good start to demonstrate their honesty. Nonetheless, Joseph imprisons them for three days, possibly as symbolic retribution for Joseph being in prison for three years.<sup>33</sup> He demanded that one of them return home to bring back the youngest brother. Yet once again, the narrative clears Joseph of impure motives by having him confess, “I fear God” (42:18). This time he reversed the demand that only one of them stay imprisoned, while the rest return to bring back the youngest to prove their honesty. The seemingly pointless prison time did some good, however, because it caused the brothers to reflect on their sins. Unaware of Joseph’s ability to understand their native language, they confessed to one another in front of him that they were guilty of their brother’s demise. Reuben recalled the sanction of the Noahic covenant that there would be a reckoning for the life of a man (Gn. 9:5–6). This moved Joseph to turn away in tears. Trust was gaining in increments. Later he returned, had Simeon bound, and gave orders that the rest return home with grain in their sacks. He secretly put their money back into their sacks. Sternberg reconstructed Joseph’s train of thought: “To reproduce the past, I will put the life of one of them into the hands of the rest and plant temptation in their bags to equal or exceed the profit they hoped to make by selling me into slavery. Will they now opt for the brother or the money?”<sup>34</sup>

The nine brothers did indeed return to Egypt with Benjamin after working hard to persuade their father to let him go, prompting a second test from Joseph. They brought back the money returned to them and brought more in exchange for more grain. Joseph’s steward would not accept the returned money. He reassured them that they did receive payment and explained that the found money in their bags must have been from God.

<sup>31</sup> Worthington, *Forgiving and Reconciling*, 170.

<sup>32</sup> John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 216.

<sup>33</sup> Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 290.

<sup>34</sup> Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 293.

They were reunited with Simeon, and they all feasted together with Joseph, who was moved when he saw Benjamin for the first time. But Joseph was not finished. He had one more scheme up his sleeve. The brothers were set up once again with each of their money put back into the mouth of their sacks, and a silver cup placed in Benjamin's sack. Before they could get too far out of town Joseph's steward caught up with them and accused them of stealing a cup. The brothers denied the charge, and confidently offered up terms that if the cup is found that person shall die, and the rest shall be servants. The steward lessened the term to make the guilty person a servant while the rest will be deemed innocent. After searching, the brothers were horrified to discover a shiny silver cup in Benjamin's sack. To come back to Jacob without Benjamin was unthinkable, so they all returned to Joseph together. Joseph acted upset, and Judah spoke up for his brothers. He recounted all their interactions, reminding Joseph of their due diligence in answering all his questions with honesty and honoring his request to bring back Benjamin. He hoped for Joseph's sympathy when he explained that Benjamin's life is tied up with Jacob's, and therefore their father would not survive if Benjamin, like his brother, was lost to him. So, what could Judah offer? The narrative already foreshadowed what Judah would offer when he persuaded his father to let Benjamin go. Unlike Reuben, who failed to convince Jacob by offering the lives of his two sons if he did not bring Benjamin back (Gn 42:37), Judah stressed saving the lives of everybody in the family, including the little ones, by putting his own life on the line (Gn 43:8–9). In Joseph's intimidating presence, Judah made good on that promise by offering himself in substitution for Benjamin to be Joseph's servant. "Judah's impassioned plea," Pierre Berthoud commented, "was the irrefutable demonstration that a significant change had taken place in the mindset and attitude of Jacob's sons...By imagining and enacting such an astute and sly scenario, Joseph had put his brothers to the test and they had passed it for there is no greater expression of love and loyalty than to substitute oneself for another."<sup>35</sup> This was too much for Joseph to bear. He commanded everybody except for the family to leave the room and then revealed his identity to them for the first time as an emotional and beautiful start to reconciliation.

Even amid raw feelings, Joseph theologized what readers are to get out of this reconciliation. He insisted that the brothers who did evil ought not to dwell on their past actions. He believed that it was ultimately God who sent him to Egypt to preserve life. Just like forgiveness, the result of reconciliation reached far beyond the welfare of the two parties in conflict. Joseph asked them—the embryonic nation God had promised Abraham—to join him trusting in God's providence and living off the fat of the land in Goshen for the sake of the remnant.

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<sup>35</sup> Pierre Berthoud, "The Reconciliation of Joseph with His Brothers: Sin, Forgiveness, and Providence," *European Journal of Theology* 17, no. 1 (2008): 8.

## B. FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION IN THE EXODUS

Now imagine being one of the first listeners to the reading of Joseph's story on the plains of Moab. Again, we are not concerned with source criticism, but with the theological intent of the canon. If we work with the framework that Genesis was written to convince Israel that leaving Egypt and possessing Canaan was God's design for Israel, then there is a significant connection to forgiveness and reconciliation.

Let us be more specific and imagine being an average Israelite and a member of one of the lesser-known tribes, say Issachar. As the gripping story is told one can imagine the narrative taking on a personal stake. There is an existential relevance to the story, especially when the happy ending of reconciliation led the narrative to list the genealogy of all twelve brothers. One can imagine our representative Israelite's ears perk up when it was read: "The sons of Issachar: Tola, Puvah, Yob, and Shimron" (Gn. 46:13). As he reflects on his family history it may dawn on him that had Joseph reverted from his forgiving way of life by allowing the raw emotions of seeing those responsible for the hardships he had endured get the best of him, the alternative might very well be vengeance. Joseph had the power to do to his brothers what they intended to do to him. He could have killed them or enslaved them, which would have cut off their legacy. Jacob nearing the end of his life would suddenly have in his household ten widows and copious grandchildren without fathers in a patriarchal society. Had that happened would our person be standing there listening to the reading of the Torah? He might even ponder as he looks across the assembly of the congregation: Would any of these brothers and sisters be here? Yet here they are. God had been faithful to his promise to Abraham that his children would be as numerous as the stars in the sky through Joseph's trust and obedience. Joseph's decisions led to Israel's flourishing. Trusting God with forgiveness and reconciliation suddenly takes on new meaning and importance.

Joseph's story, therefore, served to inspire Israel to continue the forgiving way of life and seek reconciliation wherever necessary for the sake of the nation. In the law this is spelled out in Leviticus 19:17–18: "17You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. 18You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD." One might argue v. 17 could be a summary of forgiveness and v. 18 of reconciliation. But what must not be missed is forgiveness and reconciliation were not commanded for personal moral reasons alone, Joseph's story taught Israel that these virtues were vital for the *shalom* needed for their quest to possess Canaan. No forgiveness is too small, no reconciliation insignificant. Every time a decision is made to practice these virtues a contribution is made to the social harmony of the nation. When united under the banner of God's providence and steadfast love they were in a stronger position to reach the promises of the Abrahamic covenant than divided.

## C. FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION IN THE NEW EXODUS

The story of Joseph can inspire the sojourning church in the same way. Though from the church's perspective, Joseph's acts of forgiveness and reconciliation are even grander than what ancient Israel could ever have imagined because she is able to look back at the whole of redemptive history leading up to Christ. With this broadened perspective, the church could participate in the same exercise in which our representative from Issachar engaged. Rather than speculating the consequences in which vengeance would have led, the church can trace what Joseph's decision meant for redemptive history. To start, God working through Joseph to forgive and reconcile with his brothers, put him in a position to protect and provide for them. More importantly for the narrative that highlighted Judah above the rest, Jacob's fourth son is preserved. Because Judah could continue to raise his progeny, Jacob could prophesy over Judah "the lion cub" that kingship would belong to his tribe (Gn 49:8–12). This prophecy eventually led to its fulfillment in the covenant with David that his line would rule forever (1 Sa 7:8–16). Christ ultimately fulfilled this covenant as he inaugurated the kingdom of God. Since each event builds upon one another, one might say that these sequences in redemptive history were contingent upon Joseph forgiving and reconciling with his brothers. If Joseph enacted vengeance, thus wiping away Judah. What of Jacob's prophecy? What then of David? What then of Christ? Would God create a different trajectory to fulfill his same mission of advancing the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven? It is unnecessary speculation because Joseph repeatedly credited God for how everything turned out (Gn 45:5, 7–8; 50:19–20). So then for redemptive history, forgiveness and reconciliation are no light matters. One man's decision to practice these virtues, resting in God's providence, had significant ripple effects for the people of God and for the life of the world. How much more if the people of God did the same together?

## IV. CONCLUSION

Joseph's story teaches the church that forgiveness and reconciliation are essential virtues of building the kingdom of God for the flourishing of the world that Christ inaugurated and will eventually consummate. At a crossroads of a person's life, to weigh whether or not to forgive and/or reconcile, there are several factors to consider that many books helpfully list. One more consideration could involve stepping outside of oneself and asking how one's decision will advance the kingdom of God, which to be clear is not relegated to merely the spiritual domain, but all-encompassing and integrative to life. We have seen from Joseph's story that resting in God's sovereignty and care over conflicts allowed Joseph to cultivate a forgiving way of life and take steps to reconcile with his brothers. The ripple effect of Joseph's story of forgiveness and reconciliation had significantly blessed Joseph as an individual, the people of God, and the world. More research could explore how much if any forgiveness and reconciliation advance social progress. But in the end, Witvliet insightfully commented,

As valuable as research data are, they simply can't serve as our ultimate motivation. (What if the data shows that forgiveness is worse for us?) We don't forgive *because* it benefits us. Those benefits may be a welcome by-product. But our motivation to forgive is rooted in God's call to forgive, our gratitude for God's forgiveness of us, and our desire to imitate Christ—the one who perfectly modeled forgiveness and even now perfects our efforts to practice forgiveness.<sup>36</sup>

Joseph's story teaches that the *imitatio Christi* does not necessarily mean that the church ought to be withdrawn from the world, focusing only on interior spirituality, but rather the opposite, imitate for sake of the world. The church is called to forgiveness and reconciliation for the sake of the kingdom.

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<sup>36</sup> Witvliet, "Forgiveness," 144–145.