

Genesis 39:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And Joseph was brought down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him of the hands of the Ishmeelites, which had brought him down thither.

Analysis

And Joseph was brought down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an ... This passage is part of the Joseph narrative, a masterfully crafted account demonstrating God's sovereign providence working through human choices and circumstances to accomplish His redemptive purposes. The Joseph cycle shows how God transforms evil intentions into instruments of salvation.

Central themes include divine providence orchestrating events toward redemptive ends, the testing and refinement of character through suffering and success, forgiveness overcoming betrayal and injustice, and the preservation of God's covenant people through famine. Joseph's rise from slavery to second-in-command of Egypt illustrates how God exalts the humble and uses seeming disasters for ultimate good.

Theologically, these chapters reveal:

1. God's meticulous sovereignty over all events, even evil human actions
2. suffering as preparation for future service rather than punishment
3. forgiveness as reflecting divine character and enabling reconciliation
4. God's covenant faithfulness across generations ensuring the survival and blessing of His people

5. how present suffering gains meaning when viewed from the perspective of God's larger purposes.

Joseph's words "you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (50:20) epitomize biblical theodicy and providence.

Historical Context

The patriarchal narratives (Genesis 12-50) reflect the cultural, social, and legal customs of the ancient Near East during the Middle Bronze Age (2000-1500 BCE). Archaeological discoveries including the Mari tablets, Nuzi tablets, and Egyptian records confirm many details: nomadic pastoralism, covenant-making ceremonies, marriage customs, property laws, and international travel patterns described in Genesis.

The cultural practices reflected include: treaty/covenant forms (Genesis 15), bride-price customs (Genesis 24, 29), inheritance laws favoring firstborn sons (Genesis 25, 27), adoption practices (Genesis 15, 30), levirate-type arrangements (Genesis 38), and Egyptian administrative systems (Genesis 41, 47). These parallels confirm Genesis's historical reliability while showing how God worked within ancient cultural frameworks to accomplish His purposes.

For later Israelites, these narratives established their identity as Abraham's descendants, explained their claim to Canaan, justified their possession of Joseph's bones (Exodus 13:19), and provided models of faith despite imperfection. The patriarchs' failures and God's faithfulness encouraged Israel that covenant relationship depended on God's grace rather than human merit. The movement from Mesopotamia to Canaan to Egypt set the stage for the Exodus and conquest narratives.

Related Passages

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Study Questions

1. What theological truths about Joseph and Potiphar's Wife emerge from this passage?
2. What obstacles prevent us from living out the truths presented in this verse?
3. How does understanding Christ as the ultimate fulfillment illuminate this passage's meaning?

Interlinear Text

וְיֹסֵף	הוּרָד הוּ	מִצְרַיִם	וּקָנָה הוּ	פּוֹטִיפָר	סָרִיס
And Joseph	was brought down	to Egypt	bought	and Potiphar	an officer
H3130	H3381	H4714	H7069	H6318	H5631
הַפַּרְעֹה	שָׂר	הַטַּבָּחִים	אֶיִשׁ	מִצְרַיִם	מִיַּד
of Pharaoh	captain	of the guard	an Egyptian	H4713	him of the hands
H6547	H8269	H2876	H376		H3027
הַיִּשְׁמְעֵלִיטִים	אֲשֶׁר	הוּרָד הוּ	שָׁמָּה:		
of the Ishmeelites	H834	was brought down	H8033		
H3459		H3381			

Additional Cross-References

Genesis 37:28 (References Egypt): Then there passed by Midianites merchantmen; and they drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmeelites for twenty pieces of silver: and they brought Joseph into Egypt.

Psalms 105:17 (Parallel theme): He sent a man before them, even Joseph, who was sold for a servant:

Genesis 37:36 (References Egypt): And the Midianites sold him into Egypt unto Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh's, and captain of the guard.

Genesis 37:25 (References Egypt): And they sat down to eat bread: and they lifted up their eyes and looked, and, behold, a company of Ishmeelites came from

Gilead with their camels bearing spicery and balm and myrrh, going to carry it down to Egypt.

Acts 7:9 (References Egypt): And the patriarchs, moved with envy, sold Joseph into Egypt: but God was with him,

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