Human Suffering and God's Providence: An Exegetical Study of Genesis 50:15–21

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Abstract

The existential reality of pain and suffering in the world today remains one of the most discussed objections to the existence of God. The question, posed as a trilemma, is often asked; "How can an all-powerful and all-loving God sit back and watch all this pain and suffering going on?" The argument further suggests that God is either all-powerful or all-loving, but he cannot possibly be both, as evidenced by the presence of evil in the world. Or can he be? This paper argues that God's character and response to suffering and pain reveal that he is all-powerful, all-loving, all-wise, and eternal with a clear picture of events from outside time. The paper emphasizes the addition of these two elements because they significantly change the paradigm of the trilemma raised above. This paper appropriates the story of Joseph in Genesis 50:15–21 through an exegetical analysis of this section. The study shows that God, in his transcendence, has been there from the beginning, organizing the pain system that, even amidst a fallen world, still bears the mark of genius and prepares us for life in the world. More precisely, this article argues that while in the end, the result (that is, the greater good) might provide for an emotionally satisfying answer, God's reason(s) for permitting evil remains inaccessible to us. Thus, we are simply incapable of comprehending fully God's knowledge, the intricacy of his plans, or the profound nature of the good he aims at in providence.

Keywords: Power, Relational, Evil, Suffering, Sovereignty, Redemption, Mystery.

Introduction

"To any happy flower,
The frost beheads it at its play,
In accidental power.
The blond assassin moves on.
The sun proceeds unmoved,
To measure off another day,
For an approving God."[1]

Writing a few years before her death, Emily Dickson in this poem tells a story of a "happy flower" abruptly cut off from life, all while the sun is indifferent and God approves. The flower is a symbol of human life, embodying its beauty and fragility. This poem typifies Dickson's lifelong wrestling with God and the theological problem presented by human suffering. Like the skeptics of Dickson's time, the existential reality of pain and suffering in the world today remains one of the most discussed objections to the existence of God. The question, posed as a trilemma, is often asked; "How can an all-powerful and all-loving God sit back and watch all this pain and suffering going on?"[2] The argument suggests that God is either all-powerful or all-loving, but he cannot possibly be both, as evidenced by the presence of evil in the world. Or can he be? This paper argues that the biblical view of God and his response to suffering and pain reveals that he is not only all-powerful and all-loving but also all-wise and eternal, with a clear picture of events from outside time. The paper emphasizes the addition of these two elements because they significantly change the paradigm of the trilemma raised above. This paper establishes this argument by appropriating the story of Joseph in Genesis 50:15–21 through an exegetical analysis of this section. Throughout this paper, this study reveals that God,

[1] Emily Dickson, "Apparently with no Surprise (1884)," in *EmilyDickson Museum* https://www. Emilydickinsonmuseum.org/apparently–with–no–surprise–1668/ Accessed on May 10th, 2021.

[2] See, Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2010); Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2004); Robert Pargetter, "Evil as Evidence against the Existence of God," *Mind* 85.338 (1976): 242–245. This doubt in God is further exemplified by a headline appearing in the Daily newspaper after the killing of innocent people in San Bernardino in 2015. The screaming headline read, "God isn't fixing this." For more see, _____ New York Daily Newspaper, on December 3rd, 2015. https://globalnews.ca/news/2377656/god–isnt–fixing–this–ny–daily–news–skewers–response–to–san–bernardino–shooting/?hootpostid=453e58465e2393328c37c5cca9ce6021 Accessed on August 24th, 2020.

in his transcendence, has been there from the beginning, holding the system that,[3] even amidst a fallen world, still bears the hallmark of genius and prepares us for life in the world (through suffering, we become skillful to living). More precisely, this article argues that while in the end, the result (that is, the greater good) might provide for an emotionally satisfying answer, God's reason(s) for permitting evil remains inaccessible to us. We are simply incapable of comprehending fully God's knowledge, the intricacy of his plans, or the profound nature of the good he aims at in providence.

The reason for choosing this passage is twofold: First, this section contains one of the prominent texts that speak to the problem of evil, and precisely "relational evil." Relational suffering constitutes the deprivation of goods in the natural or supernatural order. Naturally, for instance, we yearn for love from within our families to share and experience joy and goodness from each other. When evil corrupts these good things that we so desire from our loved ones, we suffer as we cannot flourish properly.[4] This describes the suffering experienced by Joseph due to the evil actions of his brothers. In verse 20, the text reads, "As for you, you intended evil against me; God intended it for good so that he might do as it has happened today- keep many people alive" (My translation). Allan P. Ross is right in declaring that "Joseph's statement is one of the classic theological statements in the book."[5] Second, this narrative is an account of the revelation of the providence of God amid suffering and pain. God's providence is a pertinent concept in addressing the problem of suffering and pain. This text can be relevant for people who might find themselves in terrible relational distress, and God may seem ambivalent or distant.

This paper analyzes this passage by establishing the text through textual criticism and providing a translation while comparing it with other translations before setting its historical and literary context. The study further explores the text using a grammatical-historical method before offering a biblical and theological reflection necessary for contemporary application.

[3] Many people are hesitant to see God as organizing and channeling the pain system to bring about his plans. Such a view assumes that evil is powerful and may 'tarnish' the integrity of God if he is involved in organizing it. But Scripture in several places attests to this character of God. See, for instance, in Isaiah 45:7, God says, "I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things." See also, Job 2:20; 1 Sam. 2:6–7. The Old Testament, in various places, presents God as being able to cause disaster to bring about his divine intentions. In the N.T., he causes the death of Jesus on the cross in order to defeat death and bring salvation to humanity (Isa. 53:10–11 & 1 Cor. 15:5)! So, rather than read our theological conclusions about God into the text, we should allow this tension to inform and enrich our theology and understanding of Scripture.

[4] For more, see Karina Robson, *Human Suffering and Relationality: A Thomistic Account* (Ph.D. Diss., Duke University, 2019).

[5] Allan P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of* Genesis (Grand Rapids: Baker house, 1988), 716.

Textual Criticism and Translation

Verse	Biblical Hebrew Text	English Translation
15	וַיִּרְאוּ[6] אֲחֵי־יוֹסֵף כִּי־מֵת אֲבִיהֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוּ יִשְׂטְמֵנוּ יוֹסֵף וְהָשֵׁב יָשִׁיב לָנוּ אֵת כָּל־הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר גָּמַלְנוּ אֹתוֹ	When[7] the brothers of Joseph realized[8] that their father was dead, they said, "Maybe[9] Joseph will bear a grudge and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him."
16	וַיְצַוּוּ[10] אֶל־יוֹסֵף לֵאמֹר אָבִיךָ צִוָּה לִפְנֵי מוֹתוֹ לֵאמֹר:	So[11] they sent a message[12] to Joseph saying, "Your father gave these instructions[13] before his death saying,
17	כֹּה־תֹאמְרוּ לְיוֹסֵף אָנָּא שָׂא נָא פֶּשַׁע אַחֶיךָ וְחַטָּאתָם כִּי־רָעָה גְמָלוּךָ וְעַתָּה שָׂא נָא לְפֶשַׁע עַבְדֵי אֱלֹהֵי אָבִיךָ וַיֵּבְךְּ יוֹסֵף בְּדַבְּרָם אֵלָיו:	'Say this way to Joseph, "Please forgive the transgression[14] of your brothers, for they did evil to you." So[15] now please forgive the

[6] The MT reads וַיִּרְאוּ 'they saw.' The LXX and the Targums have adopted similar readings. However, the vulgate has *timentes*, 'they were afraid.' Likely, this reading of the vulgate was due to a different vocalization of the MT text. The ESV, NIV, and KJV follow after the MT. There is no primary reason supporting the emending of the MT. Mathew A.K and Gordon Wenham support the retention of the MT. Perhaps the author intends to use the verb to echo the 'seeing' motif that pervades Genesis 37ff. MT reading is preferred. Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis 18–50* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 70; Gordon Wenham, Genesis: *Word Biblical Commentary vol. 2* (Dallas: Word Books Publ., 1994), 490.

[7] The NLT 'but.' However, the *waw* consecutive is translated with a temporal sense. The narrative shifts to a new scene.

[8] The verb וַיִּרְאוּ is here translated as "they realized" to indicate the idea that the brothers became fully aware of their vulnerability to harm as a consequence of the death of their father Jacob, who was also their protector. See also John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (2nd ed. The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1976), 539. ESV/NAS/ NIV 'saw,' the NLT omits this verb.

[9] NIV has 'if', NLT 'now', NASB, "What if'.

[10] וַיְצַוּוּ in the MT reads " they send" a message. Syriac and the LXX have "they approached/came" which echoes the Hebrewויגשׁו . No evidence would warrant the need for emendation following the LXX reading. Rather, v. 18, which implies that the brothers did not go there first in person, should support the retention of the MT. The Hebrew construction וַיְצַוּוּ אֶל meaning 'send' is a common phenomenon (Exd. 6:13, Jer. 27:4). Thus, the MT is retained.

[11] KJV "and.' I rendered the *waw* consecutive here as 'so' to bring out the sequential sense in the narrative flow. See also ESV/NIV.

[12] NIV has 'word', KJV 'messenger'. In the Piel, this word can mean "instruction, order or to send" (HALOT). However, the "message" is the preferred translation here since it anticipates the explanation of content provided immediately after infinitive "to say.'

[13] KJV/ESV 'command'.

[14] NLT 'wrong', NIV 'the sin and the wrongs.' Here 'transgression' is preferred to highlight their violation of a direct command of God not to murder (Gen.9:6) even though they later did not execute it because they sold him off.

[15] ESV/KJV 'and now', NIV 'now.' I understand its function here as marking the end of their dad's request as cited verbatim while also pointing to a logical procession of the request.

		transgression of the servants of the God of your father". Joseph broke into tears[16] when they spoke to him.
18	וַיֵּלְכוּ[17] גַּם־אֶחָיו וַיִּפְּלוּ לְפָנָיו וַיֹּאמְרוּ הִנֶּנּוּ לְךָ לַעֲבָדִים׃	And the brothers also came to see Joseph, and they fell[18] before him, and they said, "See, we are your servants."
19	וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם יוֹסֵף אַל־תִּירָאוּ כִּי הֲתַחַת אֱלֹהִים אָנִי׃	But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid,[19] for am I in place of God?"
20	וְאַתֶּם חְשַׁבְתֶּם עָלַי רָעָה אֱלֹהִים[20] חְשָׁבָהּ לְטֹבָה לְמַעַן עֲשֹׂה כַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה לְהַחֲיֹת עַם־רָב׃	As for you, you intended[21] evil against me; God intended it for good so that he might do as it has happened today– keep alive many people.
21	וְעַתָּה אַל־תִּירָאוּ אָנֹכִי אֲכַלְכֵּל אֶתְכֶם וְאֶת־טַפְּכֶם וַיְנַחֵם אוֹתָם וַיְדַבֵּר עַל־לִבָּם׃	So[22] now, do not fear. I will provide for you and your little ones. Thus, he comforted them by[23] speaking kindly to them.

Historical Background

The story is set within Egypt at around 1600BC when Hyksos kings were still reigning in Egypt.[24] It is happening after the burial of Jacob was held across Jordan in Canaan. However, the scene here is occasioned by events traced from Genesis 37. Joseph, his father Jacob, and his brothers are in Canaan, in the land belonging to Isaac. Joseph is introduced as a teenager

[16] ESV/NIV/NAS "wept."

[17] ויבכו has been proposed for a possible reading meaning 'they broke into tears,' perhaps in view and in solidarity with Joseph's weeping. The MT has the verb וַיֵּלְכוּ which refers to the movement of Joseph's brothers. There is no support for such a revision. The KJV, ESV, NIV, and NAS all follow the MT reading. The MT reading is therefore retained.

[18] NIV 'threw themselves down,'

[19] NLT 'do not be afraid of me.'

[20] Here the MT has 'God.' The Samaritan Pentateuch proposes the insertion of 'but' perhaps to bring out the contrast between God's actions and the action of Joseph's brothers. This suggestion has been adopted by the KJV, NIV, and ESV. However, one can be argued that the antithetical clause by itself helps bring out the contrast without needing to amend the text (see also Wenham, *Word Biblical*, 490 and Hamilton, '*Genesis, 700*). The MT is therefore retained.

[21] NAS/ESV, 'meant', KJV 'thought'.

[22] Resumptive *waw* consecutive. Contra ESV, NLT, KJV

[23] I render the *waw* here as *waw* of means. See also NIV.

[24] Joel A. Freeman, "Joseph, Egypt and the Hykssos' in *The Freeman Institute* http://www.freemaninstitute.com/Gallery/joseph.htm Accessed on 12/3/2015.

shepherding the flock. Twice, he has dreams that indicate he will rule over his family (37:6–11). This caused tension and led to familial rivalry between him and his brothers. So, his brothers hatched a scheme to halt the dream's fulfillment.

Then the setting shifts quickly to Shechem and immediately to Dothan, where Joseph was sent to inquire of his brothers in the grazing field. Here, the brothers find an excellent opportunity to execute their evil plan against Joseph. With their murder plans failing due to Judah and Reuben's intervention, Joseph is sold to merchants from Midian (37:18–20).[25] His brothers return home to deceive Jacob of Joseph's possible death. Meanwhile, Joseph is sold into Potiphar's house in Egypt (37:33–38).

In Egypt, Joseph experienced prosperity and was later promoted to a supervisory position in the house of Potiphar. While performing his role, he rejected his master's wife's sexual advances. This led to his imprisonment after the wife of Potiphar falsely accused him (39:1–19). But Bible records that God's presence was with Joseph in prison. He later emerged from imprisonment after interpreting Pharaoh's dream. He was placed in charge of Pharaoh's house, tasked with mobilizing food reserves in preparation for the impending famine (Gen. 40–41). In a small ceremony, Joseph was given an Egyptian name and a wife. Joseph's influence over Egypt was immense. During the famine period, Joseph's brothers went down to Egypt to get grains for food, marking Joseph's first contact with his brothers since Dothan. With Joseph's influence, Israel settled in Goshen of Egypt. Having aged, his father instructed Joseph on how his remains should be buried, and after blessing all his sons, he died (50:1–14). Joseph and his brothers are back in Egypt. But his brothers are worried that Joseph might take revenge against them for their earlier ill–treatment against Joseph. Therefore, this context provides a brief background for the events happening in this passage.

Literary Context.

Genesis is the book of beginnings. It opens with the statement, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). Genesis 1:1–2:3 records in the poetic form God's creation of the world and living creatures. The creation comes into existence as God speaks, and it comes to pass, demonstrating the power and the effectiveness of the word of God. Genesis is also the

[25]The historicity of this narrative bears archeological support. Kitchen notes that "the price of twenty Shekels paid for Joseph in Genesis 37:28 is the correct average price for a slave in about 18th century BC", see Kenneth A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1966), 68.

first book of the three major subdivisions of the Hebrew Bible, thus the first book of the Bible. Moreover, Genesis bears the record of witness to the profound experiences of humanity, thus shaping the production of the rest of the books of the Bible. For Genesis, in particular, these experiences of humanity are espoused by developing the kinship motif using the genealogy structure.[26]

Accordingly, the genealogy structure is essentially the constitutive center of the story of Genesis and thus establishes the framework for outlining this book. Broadly, the genealogies of Genesis 1–11 provide the narrative of the primeval history, starting with the creation story in Genesis 1, climaxing with the creation of humanity. This creation story is retold again in Genesis 2–3. The genealogies begin in Genesis 4 with progress from the first created human family to Abraham, who introduces the second part of Genesis, the patriarchal story (Gen.12–50). Noteworthy, the genealogical structure of the patriarchal narratives zooms in closely on the family relationship, highlighting the relationship of parents and children mainly in Abraham's story (12–25:18) and of brother to brother in Jacob-Esau narrative (Gen.25:19–36).[27] Joseph's story picks up from Genesis 37–50. It connects the narratives of the individual patriarchs in Genesis to the history of the people of Israel in the book of Exodus. Notable in this story is the dynamics of the relationship between parents and children and between siblings, which establishes this narrative as a literary gem that has attracted a lot of scholarly attention.[28]

The dynamics of family relationships in the story of Joseph provide the context upon which the story in Genesis 50:15–21 is developed. In particular, this passage is located within the larger unit of Genesis 37–50, whose overall function is to recapitulate the *toledot* of Jacob and his sons. Starting from Genesis 37, the narrative opens by introducing the family of Jacob. Verses 1–4 of this chapter sets the stage for the plot development by revealing the existing family tensions, which will catalyze action. In verses 5–36, Joseph has a dream that significantly affects his brothers' relationship and attitude towards him. The fundamental issue about the dream lies in its meaning: Joseph will rule over his brothers. This dream motif is crucial as it will shape the rest of the narrative in Genesis. The brothers, therefore, hatch a scheme that will ensure

[26] Terry J. Prewitt, "Kinship Structures and the Genesis Genealogies." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 40.2 (1981): 87–98, 87.
[27] Claus Westermann, *Genesis 37–50: A Continental Commentary*. (Translated by John J. Scullion. Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1986), 23.
[28] Shubert Spero, "The Role of Destiny in the Joseph Story." *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 46. 2 (2018): 109–16, 109.

Joseph will not fulfill this. The result is an eruption of a battle "between the dream and the killers of the dream."[29]

Joseph is then sold off, which heightens the tension in the narrative since the dream's fulfillment has been jeopardized. Jacob could not accept that Joseph is possibly dead (v. 33). Uncertainty in the narrative builds up, and Genesis 37:36 reveals that the conflict is yet to be resolved, for Joseph continues to act from a different scene in Egypt. Joseph's story picks up again in Genesis 39:1. This is after the "interruption" by the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38, which serves to move forward the storyline of Joseph.[30] And so, from Genesis 39–47:28, Egypt becomes a significant scene where Joseph's experiences are brought out. His life moves from serving as a slave at Potiphar's house, imprisonment, to an exalted position under Pharaoh. Due to drought, Jacob and his descendants descended into Egypt after the brothers' initial contact and reunion with Joseph (Gen. 42–46). From Genesis 47:29–50:14, the narrative transitions into Jacob bidding farewell to his family before his death and burial in Canaan.

As the narrative lens zooms in on Joseph as a lead character, the story becomes definitive in the way it links the end to the beginning (Gen. 37) and marks the fulfillment of the dream. The narrative, therefore, functions to paint a beautiful tapestry whose grand weaver is God.[31] Immediately following this passage is the end of the narrative on the *toledot* of Jacob and his sons winding with the death and burial of Joseph (Gen.50:22–26). Notable about this concluding storyline is how it parallels the death and burial of Jacob in Genesis 50:1–14.

Exegesis of Genesis 50:15–21

The story of Genesis 50:15–21 is set in a self-contained scene connected with events that precede Jacob's legacy and death. In verse 15, the narrative opens with the brothers' apprehension of Joseph and ends with Joseph comforting and re-assuring them in verse 21. The brothers then send a messenger to Joseph in verses 16–17; before presenting themselves to Joseph for a face-to-face conversation in verses 18–21. Central to this dialogue are the words found in the middle

[29] Walter Bruggeman, *Interpretation; Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 298.

[30] See also Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 1. Contra Coats argues that the presence of chapter 39 of the Judah–Tamar story is problematic, noting that "positive conclusion about reasons for the presences are difficult...". George W. Coats, "Redactional Unity in Genesis 37–50" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93.1 (1974), 16.

[31] Mathew rightly observes that "God's will does not come to us in the whole, but in fragments, and generally in small fragments" in Kenneth A. Mathews, *The American Commentary Vol.1B* (Nashville: Broadman &Holman Publishers, 2005), 927.

of Joseph's answer in verses 19–20, which establishes the grounds for comfort. This structure forms the outline that this study will follow in analyzing this passage.

The text in verse 15 introduces a new scene while establishing a connection to preceding events. The verb וַיִּרְאוּ is here functioning to express a temporal sequence.[32] It transitions the story from וַיָּשָׁב in 50:14 where Jacob had died and had been buried while Joseph and his brothers were back in Egypt. It is presenting a new scene in the narrative where the brothers are apprehensive of Joseph. They imagine that his kindness was motivated by his love for Jacob, their now-deceased father, and not for them.[33] However, this is based on their perception, as underscored in the substantive clause. The conjunction כִּי here is evidential,[34] pointing to the absence of their protector as their reason for their fear and not so much whether Joseph's attitude against them had changed.[35] This is further emphasized in the optative clause introduced by the independent hypothetical particle לוּ.[36]

But are the brothers justified in their fear of Joseph? According to Westermann, there is no basis for the anxiety of the brothers because of what had gone before. The reconciliation that happened in Chapter 45 was definitive.[37] However, a reading of Genesis 45 shows Westermann's suggestion is hard to sustain. Joseph's 'revelation' to his brothers and the subsequent embrace demonstrates nothing more than shock, reunion, surprise, and tears of joy! A closer analysis of Chapter 45 highlights that Joseph's desire was about reconnecting with his father more than anything else (Gen. 45:3). Throughout his speech, Joseph describes himself once in relation to his brothers but speaks of "my father" four times! All the while, his brothers are left standing terrified and without a word, and when they finally talk, the content of their conversation is left out (45:3, 15). Therefore, one can argue that the superficial "reconciliation" in chapter 45 is to

[32] Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 114.
[33] See also Nilwona Nowlin, "To Save Many Lives: Exploring Reconciliation between Africans and African Americans through the Selling of Joseph." *The Covenant Quarterly*, 73.2 (2015): 15–25, 20.
[34] "Evidential" –. The causal link is with the action or situation. The focus is not what is spoken but, on the reason, the speaker is saying something". Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 149.
[35] The Targum suggests that Joseph had not joined them for dinner. See also, Jeffrey M. Cohen, "Joseph's Self–Imposed Estrangement." *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 46. 1 (2018): 25–32, 31.
[36] "It functions to subordinate clauses of unreal and concessive force," see Bruce Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 211. "Expresses the opinion or the perception held by the object of the preposition," see Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 114.
[37] Westermann, *Genesis*, 204.

get Jacob (and his family) down to Egypt and be with his son Joseph.[38] A son who had ascended to the top echelons of leadership in Egypt. Therefore, the brothers' fear was informed by the fact that genuine reconciliation had not yet occurred. More importantly, their fear was not only because of a single evil act they did to Joseph but from how they had treated Joseph long before selling him to Egypt. As L. A. Turner rightly observes that, "just as they had hated Joseph before, they now wonder whether he still bears the grudge."[39] This demonstrates that a strained relationship between these family members still existed. Therefore, this scene invites the reader into the internal tension between these brothers and points out the unresolved family feuds coloring Jacob's family story.

Unable to bear their anxiety, the brothers decide to reach Joseph (v.16–17). However, they could not dare face him, so they agreed to send a messenger on their behalf. The messenger delivered a message of reconciliation and forgiveness to Joseph. Verse 16, therefore, begins with וַיְצַוּוּ which is functioning consequentially.[40] It points out the actions of the brothers as informed by the situation previously set in verse 15. They sent a message to Joseph in which they appealed to their father's instruction to Joseph before his death (לִפְנֵי מוֹתוֹ). The infinitive construct לֵאמֹר is explicative.[41] It serves to explain the content of the message.

For many scholars, however, the claim by the brothers that their deceased father had instructed them to seek forgiveness from Joseph for their previous actions was a deceptive scheme by the brothers. According to Turner, this reveals the familiar tension running throughout this family and shows "how accomplished this family is in the art of deception." [42] To him, the previous narrative has no record of this claim, making it implausible. Besides, Westermann sees this simply as a case of literary reworking in which the brothers are reproducing their father's intention.[43]

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[38] According to McConville, there is still more to be resolved after the events in chapter 45. For details see, Gordon J. McConville, "Forgiveness as Private and Public Act: A Reading of the Biblical Joseph Narrative." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 75. 4 (2013): 635–647.

39 Laurence A. Turner, *Genesis. Readings, a New Biblical Commentary* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 206; Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis, A Commentary*. (2nd ed., reved. The Old Testament Library. London: SCM Press, 1963), 431–432. Ephraim A. Speiser, *The Anchor Bible: Genesis* (Edited by William F. Albright and David Noel Freedman. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 196), 378.

[40] "Expresses logical result, describing an action or situation resulting from a previous action or situation." Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 85.

[41] Waltke and O'Connor, *An Introduction*, 608; Ronald J. Williams, *William's Hebrew Syntax 3rd Ed*. By J. Beckman (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2012), §195.

[42] Turner, *Genesis,* 206.

[43] Westermann, *Genesis*, 204.

From an African reading, however, the claim is not problematic at all. For instance, among the Kalenjin people of East Africa, a claim to carry specific instruction with an appeal to the deceased gets full respect and summons the attention and total obedience of the targeted audience.[44] The word of a deceased (especially of a parent or a respected person) is accorded respect almost like a divine word because, at death, the deceased takes the spirit form and resides close to the dwelling of the Supreme Being (*Asis*). The demands of the dead are never questioned or subjected to verification. Their word is supreme and weighty; as such, it is accepted with authority and finality. This is because of the repercussion that might follow should it be violated, doubted, or disregarded. Thus, the legitimacy of the order is not in what is claimed but in whose name the claim is made. The onus of truth, therefore, lies not on the intended recipients of the message but the person asserting on behalf of the deceased. For whoever makes a false claim or disregards the claim will invite severe consequences from the dead, including "taking you with them" through death. Therefore, because of the risk that undergirds the appeal, the claim by the person is never considered a lie.

At least, there is no evidence that the brothers were making false claims concerning what they purported to be their father's wish. Also, Joseph does not counter the claim, and the narrator is silent, leaving us to our imaginations. Just because the author did not record specific instructions from Jacob does not mean it did not happen. Truth is not only what is in written form. Truth is also orally passed down! Contrary to Turner, this paper agrees with Von Rad that the appeal by the brothers to an earlier instruction of Jacob does not necessarily amount to a lie.[45] It is possible that when they brought the news of Joseph in Egypt, the brothers confessed and sought forgiveness from their father for lying to him about Joseph's death (Gen. 37:31–35), and at some point, he could have impressed upon them to equally seek forgiveness from Joseph. As F. Delitzsch rightly speculates that Jacob would have persistently "impressed upon them this duty in the case of his death and the same time have allayed their anxiety by such counsel."[46] From Genesis 45, it is evident that Joseph respected and loved his father. He risked his pain, tricking his brothers with a silver cup, and later revealing himself to them just to know about his

[44] For more about the Kalenjin people, their Origins, and traditional beliefs, see Kipkoech araap Sambu, *The Kalenjin People's Egypt Origin Legend Revisited: Was Isis Asiis? A Study In Comparative Religion* (Nairobi: Longhorn Publishers, 2007).
[45] Von Rad, *Genesis,432.*
[46] Franz Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis* (Translated by Sophia Taylor. Added T.–P.: Clark's Foreign Theological Library. New Series. V. 36–[37]. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1888), 405.

father's welfare (Gen. 44–45). Consequently, the brothers are feeling exposed due to the death of Jacob, the man Joseph loved at the cost of setting his pain aside so the brothers could return and bring him down to Egypt. In their vulnerability, these brothers use Jacob's instruction to Joseph as a symbol of authority for their cover in case Joseph contemplates taking revenge against them. E.O. Nwaoru, opting to downplay the debate, concludes that whether Jacob gave the instructions or not, this "strategy has its useful purpose in the process of reconciliation, for the last words of a loving and wise father cannot be ignored (Prov. 6:20; 7:1–3; 23:22)."[47] The claim by the brothers, therefore, serves to enhance the tension in the narrative.

The brothers pleaded for Joseph's forgiveness through their messenger in a message carefully crafted with emotion-inducing words (v. 17). The word from the brothers moves Joseph to weep. First, this verse does not begin with the usual narrative sequence (כֹּה־תֹאמְרוּ), but the conjunction כִּי is indicating how the action happened. It emphasizes the content and how they passed the message to Joseph. Second, the message contains two imperative commands to Joseph to forgive his brothers for their transgression. The second imperative is a reiteration of the first, directly bearing Jacob's instruction to Joseph. Therefore, the significance of the imperative is to express the wishes of the speaker, emphasize urgency and demand immediate, specific action from the person receiving the command.[48] In this case, the brothers hope that Joseph will be moved to forgive them through their father's request. Using their father's instructions, the brothers come out openly to name their sin for what it is. This act is profound because it underscores their truth-telling and underpins confession as a cardinal principle in seeking forgiveness and reconciliation from a victim. Or as Nowlin rightly comments that "confession and repentance require an accurate identification and naming of the wrong(s) inflicted."[49] In addition, the brothers identify their relationship to Joseph, describing themselves as servants of "the God of your father." This crucially highlights the role of sin in severing family relationships.[50] Their message deeply affected Joseph, and so he wept! This is the sixth time that

[47] Emmanuel O. Nwaoru, "Genesis 50:15–21 and Its Challenges to the Reconciliation process in Africa" *Scriptura* 104.0 (2013): 377–387, 381.
[48] Bruce K. Waltke & M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona, Ind.: Eisenbrauns,1990), §34.4a.; Paul Jouon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Subsidia Biblica 14; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1991), § 114m; Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 63.
[49] Nowlin, "To Save Many Lives," 21.
[50] In Genesis 3:12, brokenness in a relationship due to sin is highlighted when Adam blames 'the woman you (God) gave me." Contrast this with Genesis 2:23, where the woman is "the bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh"; Gen 37:32, etc.

Joseph is weeping since Genesis 42:24 (See also, 43:30; 45:15; 46:29; 50:1). It is not exactly clear what caused him to weep. Perhaps the reality of his family's brokenness broke his heart; it is also possible that although his suffering led to the good intended by God (v. 20), the paradox remains that he has no answer to justify and explain all the suffering he experienced. For a while, he might have felt alone and forsaken during those moments of pain, and he is moved because, in retrospect, he sees the presence of God's hand even when he was in the most unpleasant times and places. Regardless, for Joseph, these tears not only give language to his pain, but also are a praise to God for his experience of God's saving acts.[51] More importantly, Joseph's lament ushered him into a space of reconciliation with his brothers.

From verses 18–21, the narrative takes a new turn towards reconciliation as the brothers come before Joseph. Joseph assures the brothers (v.19) and promises to care for them (v. 21). In verse 18, the scene changes as the brothers decide to appear before Joseph. With their words of remorse already presented through an emissary, the brothers offer their request by bowing down before Joseph. Their bowing down is symbolic of their surrendering themselves to Joseph as his servants. The action of the brothers heightens the tension and further develops the story. Of note about this passage, is that the narrative resumes its sequence (וַיֵּלְכוּ) after the break-in verse 17, showing a logical succession of events. The particle גַּם is an adverb functioning as גַּם for addition.[52] It locates Joseph's brothers together with him. Notably, the interjection הִנָּנּוּ exhibits a doubling of second and third radical נ. Such doubling is not standard and perhaps functions here to intensify the pronunciation of the interjection and show how anxious the brothers were as they appeared before Joseph. The proposition לְפָנָיו is locative,[53] pointing to the actions of these brothers before Joseph. They were placing themselves at his disposal. This is dramatic and significant, for it evokes memories of Joseph's dreams in Genesis 37:9–11.

Up until this point, Joseph has not uttered a single word to his brothers. So, in verses 19, the narrative takes an unusual syntactical arrangement (וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם יוֹסֵף), placing the object before the subject. The author is pointing out something important concerning the object of the verb (brothers). Perhaps he wants to show that it is to Joseph's brothers, mentioned in verses 18, that Joseph responds to, and not necessarily the intermediaries sent earlier. Finally, Joseph addresses

[51] See Claus Westermann, "The Role of the Lament in the Theology of the Old Testament." *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 28. 1 (1974): 20–38, 22–24.
[52] "Adverb–indicates that something is in addition to something else" Williams, *Syntax*, §378.
[53] "Locative–points to what is 'before' or' 'in front of,'" see Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 115.

the request of his brothers, and his response is enigmatic (v. 19). However, his reply does not necessarily speak about the pious character of Joseph or an acknowledgment of his incapability to adjudicate on the issue before him, thus deferring it to God's court. Neither is it a ploy by Joseph to keep his brothers guessing.[54] Instead, Joseph simply points out that God has already spoken on the matter raised by the brothers! Or as von Rad accurately comments that "…Joseph's meaning here is that, in the remarkable conduct of the whole story, God himself has already spoken. He has included the guilt, the brothers' evil, in his saving activity; he has preserved for them a 'great remnant' (Gen. 45.7), and has thus justified them."[55] Hence, Joseph cannot condemn them since he would be usurping "the place of God." So, he assures them by dispelling their fears. The conjunction כִּי used here is causal and is functioning to point out Joseph's reasoning behind his assurance and comfort to the brothers. In other words, their fear ought to dissipate, not based on Joseph's forgiveness but on the foundation of God's revealed plan and purpose.

The plan of God assumed in Joseph's rhetorical question in verse 19 is further elaborated in verse 20. Both verses 20 and 21 do not begin with the usual narrative sequence (וְאַתֶּם חְשַׁבְתֶּם). The author is probably here stressing that the independent pronoun is functioning to express emphasis (you yourselves) and draw contrasts between the brothers' intended plan with the plan of God. More importantly, the word חשׁב (*chashav)* translated here as "meant" serves to underscore not just the thought to act but includes the execution of the intent.[56] Of note here also is that "the good" intended by God was not grafted on to the evil intended by the brothers. Instead, the two statements ('you meant'… 'God meant') are unyielding side by side, indicating that both the evil and the good began growing at the same time on the same soil– that is the life of Joseph.[57] As it developed in the life of Joseph, evil and 'the good' like vines, trained onto each other, but they did not merge into one. Instead, evil died and succumbed to the will of God, and it is only the good of God that grew into maturity. According to Joseph, the good embedded in God's overriding plan is the "preservation of many lives." The preposition לְ in לְטֹבָה indicates the

[54] Contra Brueggemann, *Genesis Interpretation*, 372.
[55] Von Rad, *Genesis*, 432.
[56] Westermann, *Genesis*, 205; TLOT, חשׁב, 482.
[57] Von Rad, *Genesis*, 432. The "but" contrasting the evil intention of the brothers and the good of God found in different English translations is not present in the Hebrew text.

purpose[58] of God in allowing their evil plans to happen. It was intended for the survival of many people. The preposition לְמַעַן is pointing to the result[59] of God's actions-survival of many from famine (Egyptians and Israelites included). Therefore, Joseph's explanation in verse 19 is "that God's forgiveness, which leads to reconciliation, is joined with his actions which saves the lives of many."[60] The survival of many will be significant when this action is considered within the context of God's primeval promises.

To reinforce his assurance, Joseph promises to continue providing for them and their children (v. 21). Probably the famine was still ongoing, but his promise is a concrete demonstration that his heart is aligned to the plan of God. He shows the brothers that they and their children are part of the many that God had planned to save. Joseph will not take the place of God by devising a plan contrary to God's revealed will. What began for Joseph as a simple dream in Genesis 37 has turned into fulfillment. Therefore, he re-assures the brothers that he will personally (אָנֹכִי אֲכַלְכֵּל) provide for them and their children. The *waw* in the verb וַיְדַבֵּר is a *waw* of manner indicating how Joseph comforted his brothers. That is, he consoled them as though to mark the end of their grieving while encouraging them to let got their fears and anxiety, for they were safe with him.[61] The altruism in Joseph, enhanced by his theological justification in verses 19–20, leads to restoring the familial relationship. He becomes their benefactor while replacing their fear with his comfort and promise to care.

Biblical-Theological Reflection

In Genesis 50:15–21, Joseph's narrative reaches its climactic point with a clear picture of the dream's fulfillment as traced back to Genesis 37. The dream motif in Joseph's narrative is vital as it provides a vehicle through which God's purpose is revealed.[62] It shows that God's hand was behind the scenes pulling strings, triggering the events in Joseph's life with the intention that His blessings upon the survival of Israel and many others are realized.[63] This is brought out clearly in

[58] Williams, *Syntax*, §277. "Purpose–shows the motive behind an action," Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax,* 111.
[59] When it is used this way, its object is usually an infinitive construct'– Williams, *Syntax*, §368.
[60] Westermann, *Genesis*, 205
[61] See, HALOT, "נחם", 688.
[62] Wenham has observed how dreams were viewed as revelatory, as messages from God. For a detailed discussion, see Wenham, *Word Biblical*, 359.
[63] Brueggemann espouses this point in detail when discussing the 'hiddenness of God' in Genesis 37. Walter Brueggemann, *A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Know press, 1982), 293.

50:20: "You meant it for evil, God meant it for good." This is a clear demonstration that when evil confronts the purposes of God, it succumbs. This fact is echoed by Job when speaking of God's purposes. He says that "no plans of yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:2). Von Rad comments,

> The statement about the brothers' evil plans and God's good plans now opens up the innermost mystery of Joseph's story. It is in every respect, along with a similar passage in chapter 45:5–7, the climax to the whole. Even where no man could imagine it, God had all strings in his hand. But this guidance of God is only asserted; nothing more explicit is said about how God incorporated man's evil into his saving activity.[64]

Therefore, God's providence is a powerful theological message here. This is key since it places this narrative at the center of God's plan to realize His promises to the patriarchs, albeit partially (Gen. 12:1–3).

The idea of God's plans coming to fulfillment through evil human deeds is not only confined to this passage. One could imagine Pharaoh, Daniel, Esther, and Ruth, among others.[65] Specifically, the reading of the Psalms of lament shows how God constantly frustrates the plans of the evil ones.[66] In the New Testament, the death of Jesus on the cross demonstrates a similar instance where an evil deed is swallowed into divine purpose. For to those who[67] crucified him, Jesus said, "Father forgive them because they do not know what they are doing" (Lk. 23:34). Jesus here is not absolving them of their responsibility for their actions, but their blindness of God's greater purpose–the salvation of humanity. It is through the death of Jesus on the tree that lead to the realization of the primeval blessings-the nations are blessed (Gal. 3). As P. Boyle observes that "…the ultimate good of Christ's suffering [*is*] the redemption of the world."[68] This is God's providence.

Furthermore, sin and its impact on humanity is a message of theological significance revealed in this story. Even though the divine purpose is shown as having overruled the evil intention of Joseph's brothers from coming to fruition, their responsibility is laid bare. Their guilty feelings help elucidate this point. While alluding to the evil plans of the brothers against

[64] Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis; A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 432.
[65] For a detailed analysis, see Hamilton, *Genesis*, 707.
[66] For further analysis of Psalms of lament, see Brueggemann, *A Bible Commentary*, 373.
[67] Hamilton has suggested that Judas Iscariot is counted among this group and in particular because "he is to Jesus what Joseph's brothers were to Joseph." For more, see Hamilton, *Genesis*, 707.
[68] Patrick Boyle, "The Theology of Suffering." *The Linacre Quarterly* 70. 2 (2003): 96–108, 103.

Joseph, Stephen accuses his audience of being ready to stone him, "as your fathers did so do you" (Acts 7: 51). By this, he connects his audience's intention to kill him with those of Joseph's brothers. The actions of murder by the brothers bring back memories of Cain killing his brother Abel (Gen.4). This serves to underscore the impact of human brokenness arising from the fall as a reality affecting all human behavior and relationships.

More importantly, although Joseph suffered at the hands of people one would least expect- his brothers- his suffering and pain are redefined within the sovereignty of God as espoused in this passage. His brothers thought Joseph would revenge for their guilt over what befell him. However, his reply gave meaning to the suffering he faced, given God's ultimate purpose. Stephen was later to proclaim that God delivered Joseph from his tribulations (Acts.7:10).[69] This means that, within the sovereign plans of God, human suffering finds not just a theological purpose but also its chronological end. Human suffering is not eternal. Though sometimes chronic, it still is temporal.[70] Joseph left his brothers as a slave, but he oversaw all of Egypt in the end. This truth is picked up later by John in his message from the Lord Jesus to the church of Smyrna. Jesus identifies himself as the first and the last. He then encourages this church over what they were about to suffer. He says, "You will have tribulation for ten days" (Rev.2:10). The significance of "ten days" here is not so much on the length of days as it underscores the temporary nature of suffering. For just as God established the limits to the waves (Job 38:11), so has he marked the end of human pain and suffering (Rev. 21).

In summary, therefore, the story of Joseph (Gen.50:15–21) points to a sovereign God who acts to bring about his purposes through mysterious ways. In a fallen world, God is not aloof to human pain and suffering. Instead, in His sovereignty, suffering and pain find their chronological end. As illustrated in this story, he brought hatred, imprisonment, famine, separation, alienation, and family brokenness to an end in the life of Joseph. He does this in a mysterious way that involves the coupling of human agency and his (God's) intervention. A God with such a "method" is disappointing to a society that is so consumed with a culture of instant results under a predictable system and human control.

The idea of God's "method" above informs the church and Christian missions today. One might ask, was there no other way for God to bring about this purpose than the part of Joseph's

[69] See also Thomas W. Currie, "Between Text and Sermon; Genesis 50:15–21" *Interpretation*, 57.4 (2003), 414.
[70] See also Boyle, "The Theology of Suffering," 102. According to scripture, this applies to followers of Christ. See, for instance, 2 Cor. 4:17; Jas. 1:12.

affliction? Joseph points out that in the end, God intended to rescue many lives (Gen.50:20). This is striking to the way many Christians conceive missions. It has been pointed out that the challenge of Christian missions is the conception of missions around money, methods, and management.[71] It is thought that without all these three, the Christian mission is impossible. The story of Joseph, in which God demonstrates the enigma of his sovereignty by delivering many from the danger of famine, reminds the church that God's mission is never dependent on our methods or resources.

A well-written reflection on the Syrian refugee crisis helps illustrate my point. David Crabb writing for *Desiring God,* calls out on Christians to think whether this form of suffering (refugees) could be God's method of reaching Syrians.[72] He invites Christians to reflect on the pain of Syrians by asking, "*What is God doing*? What if, through the senseless evil of civil war, God was bringing unreached people groups to our cities? What if, through great tragedy, God was bringing about the triumph of the gospel?" He goes on to say, "In the faces of these refugees, we see 10,000 reasons for this tragedy. Men mean it for evil, but God means it for good… God is building his church- *through this refugee crisis*- and the very hellishness of ISIS will not prevail against it."[73] This is a timely message for the church today.

Conclusion

In conclusion, therefore, the biblical narrative examined above shows that the suffering of Joseph portrays the mystery of the sovereignty of God. According to Joseph, the suffering he experienced reveals the enigmatic purpose of God. For although the evil by the brothers trained itself on the good intended by God, evil surrendered along the way, and God's purpose- the deliverance of many- triumphed. In other words, while the brothers' actions were motivated by ill feelings and hate towards Joseph, there seems to be a hidden hand working to bring out the

[71] For similar observation, see Samuel Escobar, *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 25–27.

[72]David Crabb, "Building his church in Refugee Crisis," in Desiring God, on November 19th, 2015, http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/building–his–church–in–a–refugee–crisis accessed on December 3rd, 2015

73 Ibid. He adds, "Christian missionaries have spent years praying, strategizing, and risking everything to go to these people. Now, God is bringing them here. After raising tens of thousands of dollars, undergoing extensive training, leaving everything familiar, and going through the grueling process of learning a foreign language- only then could a missionary experience the breakthrough of having the kind of conversation Stephanie and Fatimah had just casually at our local library in Minneapolis".

preordained end.[74] This describes the providence of God. It is important for it underscores that God in his sovereignty, as revealed in the story examined, is never withdrawn from the chaos, the mess, confusion, or the suffering of his people. Instead, he is involved in their suffering, and he is actively working to frustrate evil, bringing it to an end, and eventuate the good that he has planned from the beginning. To bring out his plans, God does not work beside human suffering and pain but through it to transform it. Thus, Joseph, in the end, remembering the terrifying experiences of violence and pain he underwent because of his brothers' actions (Gen. 42:7–9), speaks conciliatorily to them, saying, "You intended evil, God intended it for good" (Gen 50:20). Therefore, in bringing about the salvation of many through the suffering of Joseph, God transformed Joseph's suffering into a redemptive agent. Thus, through his sovereignty, God redeemed the suffering of Joseph, demonstrating that he is in control of the universe despite the suffering and evil present on earth. Although suffering remains a mystery that is nearly removed from our ability to comprehend, the story of Joseph reminds us to trust in the power, wisdom, and the goodness of God eternal!

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[74] Spero, "The Role of Destiny in the Joseph Story," 110. See also, Hesron H. Sihombing, "Relational God in the presence of Evil: A Theology of Friendship" *SIWO* 13:1 (2020) 67–79.

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