



Preface to the Joseph Narrative

This study focuses on *The Joseph Narrative* (Genesis 37—50). Overriding other concerns was the desire to integrate both literary and biblical studies. The primary target audience is for those who wish to develop their skills in understanding biblical narrative literature.

The material presented assumes very little knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, theology, and methods of interpretation. This is predicated on the conviction that even the most intelligent person cannot understand concepts that are not explained to them. Occasionally, it was necessary to use an established technical term in order to describe a particular feature of style, syntax, or grammar. However, it is posited that it is possible to discuss complex literary matters in a language understandable to all educated people.

Obviously, not everyone is going to find everything equally helpful since abilities and achievements differ. The reader is urged to skip to those parts that can be more easily digested.

In several instances, there are technical discussions. Information is presented for those acquainted with the more technical aspects and with some who may not share my theological convictions but who are, nevertheless, also diligently seeking for answers to some of the same questions.

The overarching guide for the preparation of this study has been to address the practical use of the Joseph Narrative in the Church. Church leaders are responsible to teach the Scriptures. Unfortunately, they are seldom well equipped to analyze, explain and apply scriptural narratives.

Too many times expositors simply retell narratives and then draw a few general lessons from them. The biblical narratives, however, are far more than illustrative stories. They are highly developed and complex narratives that form theological themes. Other expositors, which may have more training in exegesis, will study a passage in more detail to clarify the meaning of everything that

happened or was said, but never crystallize the theological teaching of a passage in a manner that is both clear and relevant to today's audience.

We will look for not only what the text says, but also how it says it. If the same things are said, and said in the same way, then some general conclusions can be drawn and theological principles uncovered. These principles will then be derived from an intrinsic study of the biblical text.

Our approach will begin with a close reading of the Joseph Narrative. This will be accomplished by examining linguistic structures, patterns, word usage, and recurring literary devices. The thrust will not be on the meaning of such features (although obviously one is never free of semantics), but on the functions they serve in the literary composition.

The shape and meaning of any literary text will naturally be dependent to some extent on its linguistic fashioning. I will refer intermittently to matters of word choice, sound-play, and syntax perceptible in the original Hebrew, occasionally even offering alternative translations to indicate a significant pun. All of this, I think, should be easy for a reader to follow without any knowledge of Hebrew; and the main topics I have chosen are features of biblical narrative that for the most part can be observed reasonably well in translation.

This study will not solve every problem in *The Joseph Narrative*. Whatever is accomplished, I have reflected my own attempt to clarify some very difficult passages of Scripture. Countless issues are left for readers to pursue on their own. The following material represents the result of my own wrestling with *The Joseph Narrative*. This struggle has been a personal pursuit for many years.

A few words may be helpful about the procedure I have followed in the preparation of these notes. After a brief Introduction, this study divides into fifteen episodes. The parameter for each episode does not necessarily follow the English chapter division (i.e., Gen. 46:31--47:27; 47:28--48:22). This has been done because each episode constitutes a well-defined unit either because of unity of place, time, theme, and/or situation. Genesis, like ancient books, did not contain chapters, verses, or paragraphs. The present chapter and verse arrangement comes from Stephen Langton, who in 1226 divided Genesis into its present arrangement of chapters and verses.

Isolating a particular episode is not as easy as it may seem. It is determined by studying the structure and themes of the literature, both in the apparent episode and in the surrounding context. This step was not minimized, for it would greatly change the expository treatment if only half of an episode was dealt with, or if two episodes were joined together. Of course, if they were dealt with contextually, then the expository idea should still be true.

After a main title (which appears at the head of each page of the episode) and a subtitle, each episode is broken into the following seven parts:

PART 1: An Introduction to the Episode

Preliminary observations are first considered.

1. The form of the literary unit
2. The deliberate design of the material
3. Aspects of artistry in the selectivity of the terms and expressions
4. The overall structure of the episode as it pertains to the meaning of the unit
5. The setting of the account with the expected contrasts and comparisons
6. The significance of the dialogue in the narrative
7. The unfolding of the plot in which the basic conflicts are resolved in the overall Narrative

PART 2: Source Criticism Considerations

Source criticism is the theory known as the "Documentary Hypothesis". This theory postulates that the Pentateuch, and Genesis in particular, was composed by the amalgamation of sections and subsections derived from four independent source-documents, J, E, P, E. The theory posits that an editor (other than the traditional writers of the biblical texts) took some sections from this source, some portions from that source, and then fused them together into what we have today. A close literary analysis of the episode, however, will explain the repetition, doublets, apparent inconsistencies, and awkward constructions. This section of the notes will offer a plausible solution that will be intellectually satisfying and theological constructive.

PART 3: Theological Ideas

This part outlines what the passage of Scripture is saying about God, about man, and about the relationship between them; failure to do so will inevitably leave the exposition on the level of storytelling, historical inquiry, or Bible trivia. In narrative material, it is important to watch for the narrator's statement of interpretation, or direct statements of the LORD in response to man's actions. If no such statements appear, then we must draw the conclusions by inference within the context of the passage and larger context.

By concordance study, topical index study, and even through word studies, a careful reader can usually discover similar theological ideas in the same Book, or by the same writer, or in the same type of literature (i.e., wisdom literature). In addition, through such studies the student may come upon prophetic oracles based on the material (e.g. Hosea on Jacob's wrestling).

In identifying the theological ideas of the material, the reader discovers frequently two strands that must be correlated: those ideas with God as the Subject-Actor, and those with man. One could say that God is the subject of the Joseph Narrative (as with all Scripture), that His activities are central to the message. Nevertheless, the text is usually cast in the story line. Therefore, the subject matter is more often going to be about man's activities (past or future) in the light of what is known about God.

Recognizing these connections will make the application of the theology much easier. For example, if one were to expound Genesis 1:1--2:3, obviously, God is the central factor. He creates everything by His powerful word. The idea of the theology is clear--but how can it be applied apart from how it is to be seen in relation to man? When man is seen as the crowning point of the narrative, much of the relevance of the material comes clearer. Then, a consideration of later meditations on the material (cf. Pss. 8 and 33) shows how others interpreted and applied the creation account.

PART 4: Structure, Translation, and Synthesis

Structure. Structure includes the analysis of the structure and texture of the literary unit. In determining the meaning of the passage, the deliberate design of the unit, i.e., the rhetorical devices the writer used in forming the episode are considered. In all cases, a literary structure is formulated, and in the cases where parallel structure is not clear, some additional notes are given.

Translation. I have done my own translations of all biblical texts cited. The King James Version is the magisterial rendering in English, but even in its modern revised form it lacks a good deal in the way of clarity and philological precision, while the various contemporary translations, in striving for just those two qualities, tend to obliterate literary features of the original like expressive syntax, deliberate ambiguity, and purposeful repetition of words. A good modern translation (the best in my opinion) is the New American Standard Version (NASB). The student will do well to avoid all paraphrased Bibles when doing investigative research. My own translation of the texts at times may seem willfully awkward, but at least it will make evident aspects of the original that play an important role in the artistry of biblical narrative.

Synthesis. Synthesis involves a one-sentence summary of the entire episode, a synopsis of the unit. Limiting the synthesis to one sentence focuses upon the unity and the subordination of the parts within the episode.

PART 5: Exegetical Outline

The exegesis of a passage must demonstrate the unity and progression of the episode. A way to capture an episode's unity is to make a full exegetical outline and then write a summary of the passage in one sentence.

An exegetical outline is developed from summaries of the individual ideas or verses of the text. These individual sections are united by common themes or constructions to form the larger divisions of the passage. An exegetical outline includes everything that is in the passage and expresses the relationships between the parts, enabling the reader to see the narrative structure apart from all the descriptive and qualifying sections. Furthermore, an exegetical outline uses full sentences to express complete thoughts about the contents of the section. The sentences are descriptive and historical.

PART 6: Exposition of the Passage

The next step is the relevant and orderly presentation of the material in an expositional manner. Every new section sets forth an expository idea in a boldface italic font. I tried to present a clear, positive sentence, drawn from the overall exegesis of the scene(s), stating the applicable theological point the passage is making. The wording in this expository idea is not tied to the historical and descriptive, for that removes the lesson from the present audience; neither is the wording very contemporary, for that would leave the meaning for the original audience out of the picture. The expository idea is an attempt to express the timeless theological truth that the passage teaches, in a way that would be applicable to the original situation as well as to the contemporary corresponding situations.

PART 7: Application

Because the Bible is didactic, then it must suggest a proper course of action or proper way of thinking. I expressed this element in a specific, positive application, indicated by a single sentence in boldface capital letters.