

# Joseph's unique place in genesis



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The central, overarching story in Genesis is the account of the fathers of Israel, which contains the individual stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and finally Joseph. Although each account is compiled together, there is a fundamental shift in the authors' presentation of God once the narrative of Joseph's life begins. God is an active player, who speaks and even physically intercedes, in the lives of the first three Patriarchs as he directs their lives with his commands and promises. Within the story of Joseph's life, however, from chapters thirty-seven through fifty with the exception of chapter thirty-eight, God is not an active character in the narrative. Divine influence on this fourth generation Hebrew is undeniable, since he is able to accurately interpret dreams and seems to innately know God's will, but the deity never makes himself known to Joseph as he does to the man's three predecessors. This shift in the role of God may simply indicate an author who is speaking from a tradition separate from the J or Priestly traditions, or it may be symbolic in that Joseph, while blessed, is not as close to God as his fathers. Regardless of the historical reasons, the story of Joseph's life in the text of Genesis as a whole, from his first prophetic dreams to his royal burial in Egypt, stands apart from the rest of the account of the Patriarchs as Joseph establishes himself as a ruler among men in spite of his God's silent role. Of Joseph's three fathers, Abraham has the most interactive relationship with God beginning with his calling in chapter twelve, when God promises, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great..." (Gen. 12: 2). From this point on, God is a ubiquitous character in Abraham's life as he continually speaks to the old man. After revealing the promised land of Canaan (Gen. 13: 14-17), God verbally seals his covenant with Abraham by changing his name from Abram, requiring circumcision and

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promising once again that in return for loyalty the man "...shall be the father of a multitude of nations." (Gen. 17: 4) Abraham has such a close relationship with God that he feels inclined to reason with the deity over the destruction of Sodom as he questions the justification of destroying a minority of righteous people who happen to live in an evil city (Gen. 18: 23). This scene is the only time in Genesis when God's judgement is directly called into question, and since Abraham, who is "...but dust and ashes," (18: 27) does not lose God's favor by his questioning, he proves his exceptional status among men. Despite this elevated position, God feels it necessary to give Abraham the ultimate test as he requests the sacrifice of Isaac, his only son. After proving his loyalty to God, Abraham passes out of the narrative, and Isaac becomes the central Patriarch. In Isaac's narrative, God speaks not only to him, but to his wife Rebekah as well. God's presence is tangible enough for Rebekah to be able to go directly to him for answers when she feels the tension between Jacob and Esau in her womb (Gen. 25: 22). Even Abraham had to wait for God to come to him, and while Rebekah's inquiry does not necessarily make her more favored than her father-in-law, God's answer indicates his participatory nature in this particular story. As for his interaction with Isaac himself, God comes to him twice with the same promise that he made to Abraham as he tells the man, " I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will give to your descendants all these lands," (Gen. 26: 4). Aside from his dialogue with Isaac, the narrator of chapter twenty-six verses twelve to thirteen says that God is directly responsible for Isaac's success during his stay with Abim'elech and the Philistines as " The LORD blessed him, and the man became rich." When Isaac's son Jacob reaches maturity, God continues his active and vocalized

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role in the lives of the Hebrews. God first addresses Jacob in a dream, reiterating the promise that he made to both Isaac and Abraham while assuring that he will bring Jacob back to Haran (Gen. 28: 12-15). After Laban gives Jacob his two daughters, God steps in and selectively opens Leah's womb before Rachel's, and the latter is unable to bear children herself until God "...hearkened to her and opened her womb," (Gen. 30: 22). According to the text, without the deity's intercession, Rachel would not have borne Joseph and Benjamin. Later, when Jacob flees Laban's household, God once again acts on his behalf as he commands Laban to leave Jacob alone (Gen. 31: 24). Jacob's divine relationship continues and goes one step farther than his fathers' when he becomes physically entangled with an angel of God. Even though the text does not say outright that his wrestling opponent is of divine origin, the being disappears before sunrise, which was an ancient indication of divinity (Gen. 32: 26, p. 41, fn. 26). Finally, in chapter thirty-five, God commands Jacob to go to Bethel and safeguards his journey with "a terror," and when the man arrives at his destination, God gives him his new name, Israel. From this point on, the nature of God's character in the story of the Patriarchs changes from a vocal role to a silent one in which his presence is only acknowledged by the active characters instead of by his own voice or direct action. Joseph's career begins with his two dreams that prophesy his ascendancy over his brothers. Although Jacob chides his son over these dreams of power, he recognizes their potential import, "...his father kept the saying in mind," (Gen. 37: 11). At this point, Joseph's story has already diverted from the path of his fathers', because while they are compelled directly by the voice of God, his divine relationship expresses itself more subtly through symbolic dreams. The extent of the narrator's

acknowledgement of God's presence in this episode is to say that Joseph became successful because, "The LORD was with (him)," (Gen. 39: 2). While Abraham's worth was tested with a command from God himself to sacrifice Isaac, Joseph is tested with the deceit of Potiphar's wife and the unjust prison sentence that followed, and the fourth Patriarch proves himself as he patiently waits for release. With indirect assistance from God that is only alluded to in the text with the question, "Do not interpretations belong to God?" (Gen. 40: 8) Joseph propels his career by accurately interpreting the dreams of the butler, the baker and finally Pharaoh himself. Joseph does not receive commands or assurances from God that he had the ability to interpret dreams, he is able to simply do it. As the Prime Minister of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh, Joseph ascended to a position of terrestrial power never attained by his forefathers. From this vantage, Joseph imposes a godlike test of righteousness upon his brothers without an explicit command from God himself, and his test forces his brothers to remember their greedy and jealous actions so that they seek forgiveness once he reveals himself. Joseph's power is further demonstrated when by his own managerial capabilities, which are independent from God's direct influence, he becomes a proficient administrator, who is able to successfully extend Egypt's grain stores to last throughout the famine while providing for the surrounding territory as well. Through his land reforms, Joseph was able to feed the people of Egypt while essentially making them serfs for Pharaoh. Even though feudalism usually has negative connotations, the text indicates that the people, "...gained possessions in (Egypt), and were fruitful and multiplied exceedingly," (Gen. 47: 27). This land tenancy program also ultimately fits into God's plan for the Israelites as he related it to Abraham, because they

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had to be subjugated before he could liberate them in Exodus. After Jacob dies in Egypt, Joseph's brothers fear retribution, but he reveals his inherent knowledge of God's will when he says, "Fear not, 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," (Gen. 50: 20). Throughout his career, Joseph followed God's will with no direct contact between himself and the deity, and he gained more power over other humans than his fathers before him. Without access to extensive archaeological and anthropological data, which probably does not even exist, it is difficult to say if the story of Joseph was part of a separate tradition or even an excerpt from Egyptian history that was added to Genesis by the early editors of the Bible, but an analysis of the text itself reveals the basic difference between the God who speaks to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the divine spirit who serves as a supportive backdrop for Joseph. Perhaps the most important point to realize is the fact that these early writings are simply not consistent due to the influence of multiple authorship and regional legends and traditions. While one might draw the thematic conclusion that Joseph was not as close to God as Abraham, for example, the reverse could also be said; essentially, that Joseph is closer to God and knows him better, because he does not need to hear God's voice in order to know what his will is. The text itself only provides one of Professor Williams' "silent spots" for an answer, which leaves the accounts open to vast interpretation like every other part of the Bible. Taken as a cohesive story, the account of the Patriarchs can be said to outline a general development in the line of Abraham from God having to practically hold the hands of the grandfather, the father and the grandson to the divinely inspired intuition of <https://assignbuster.com/josephs-unique-place-in-genesis/>

the fourth generation. Whether one sees these chapters as accurate historical accounts of God's relationship with man or as complicated myths that offer insights independent of religion, the stories provide an interesting and useful glimpse into human history.