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# Joseph's Unjust Economic Policies in Genesis 47.13–26

Kilnam Cha

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Genesis is a strange book of the Bible that is filled with injustice: just to note a few cases . . . Cain kills Abel and walks; Lot's daughters rape their father; Abraham lies about his wife twice, tries to kill his own son, and becomes a paragon of faith; Jacob deceives his own family members and becomes the father of a nation; and Tamar acts like a prostitute, sleeps with her father-in-law Judah, and becomes the progenitor of David! Why is there so much injustice in Genesis? Observing that “the characters in the Hebrew Bible are all flawed human beings” and “they are good people who sometimes do very bad things,” Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz answers this question of injustice in Genesis by suggesting that “the Jewish Bible teaches about justice largely through examples of injustice and imperfection.”<sup>1</sup> While I agree with his general observation, I differ with him in that the primary reason for the presence of much injustice in Genesis is *not* necessarily to teach about justice through examples of injustice: the main theme in Genesis is God's salvific work, which highlights God's faithfulness in the midst of human imperfection. A challenge for us is to incorporate this main theme of Genesis when we preach from individual narratives in Genesis. When this challenge is ignored, we may preach something that the text does not teach. A case in point is Joseph's economic policies found in Genesis 47.13–26.

When read as a whole, like any other book, Genesis unfolds its plot, that is, the storyline. This plotline, not the individual narratives in the book, tells the whole story, so it is important to detect the plotline, which consists of three parts: the beginning, the middle and the end.<sup>2</sup> The beginning introduces the characters and a setting for the story. The middle introduces a crisis, and this crisis is resolved in the end. In Genesis the first two chapters are assigned to introduce God's creation that was “good.” That this word *good* appears seven times in Genesis 1 highlights the goodness of God's creation and prepares the reader for the crisis that will follow. In Genesis 3–11 this crisis is revealed and developed as the four different narratives (Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood, and the Tower of Babel) all share the same problem and format, namely, sin, punishment, and grace. These chapters reveal how sin spreads like a wildfire as the narratives progress. What then is God's solution to the growing power of sin? The plotline of Genesis comes quickly to the resolution: God's election of a common person Abram (12.1–3) and his transformation into the father of faith who walks the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just (18.19a).<sup>3</sup> But God's

1. Alan M. Dershowitz, *The Genesis of Justice: Ten Stories of Biblical Injustice that Led to the Ten Commandments and Modern Law* (New York: Warner Books, 2000), 2.

2. Detecting plotlines, however, can be complicated by the presence of multiple plotlines. The plotline of the Bible's metanarrative is foundational, and all individual narratives are a part of it. Individual narratives have their own plotline as well as individual books. In this paper we will focus on the plotline of Genesis.

3. The Hebrew word-pair for “right” and “just” here is *tzedakah* and *mishpat*, which frequently appears together in the Hebrew Bible and portray two opposing aspects of justice. *Mishpat* refers to retributive justice, and *tzedakah*, distributive justice that is informed by communal obligation or generosity. The “way of the Lord” requires both. Unfortunately, when we use the term *justice*, it refers to retributive justice only. For more details, see Jonathan Sacks, *Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilization* (London: Continuum, 2002), 105–124.

election of Abraham is only a beginning of the divine resolution,<sup>4</sup> and the rest of Genesis depicts his faith journey and narrates how God's faithfulness interacts with the subsequent generations of God's chosen family.

An understanding of Joseph's economic policies in Genesis 47.13–26 should begin with his advice that Pharaoh take one-fifth of the harvest during the seven years of abundance and let that food be a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine to follow (41.34–37). During the seven years of abundance the harvest was so plentiful that what Joseph collected was too much to be measured (v. 49). Joseph used the reserve to feed the people during the seven years of famine. Unfortunately, at the end of the famine Joseph acquired the people and their land for Pharaoh so that the Egyptians became serfs to Pharaoh, who would continue to collect one-fifth of their produce from then on (47.20–26).

In both Jewish and Christian interpretive history two morally opposite evaluations of Joseph occur. On one hand, he is portrayed as an upright hero, who functions as a model of virtue<sup>5</sup> and on the other as a devious politician.<sup>6</sup> Certainly, Joseph had some traits we can learn from, but his economic policies do not belong with those traits. When reading Genesis, we may get an impression that the text does not condemn Joseph's economic policies. The text makes it clear that the Egyptians voluntarily sold their land and themselves as slaves to Pharaoh (vv. 19, 25). They also verbalized their appreciation, "You have saved our lives." Their words seem to justify Joseph's policies. Surely, he seems like God's instrument of saving both the Egyptians and the Israelites. Does this mean that we should approve and adopt Joseph's economic policies? Terence E. Fretheim writes, "Joseph functions as a new Adam (e.g., 41.38), for not only the Egyptians, but the entire world benefits from his 'dominion' (vv. 56–57), and the command to be fruitful and multiply is fulfilled in this family (47.27)."<sup>7</sup> Evidently, God used Joseph to deliver people from the famine, but that does not mean that God approves of his ruthless economic policies that resulted in the Egyptians becoming Pharaoh's serfs. Their words of appreciation do not justify Joseph's ruthless policies, especially when his policies are assessed in the context of the entire Hebrew Bible. When taken out of the context of the Torah, it would be too easy to see Joseph as a model of wisdom to be emulated, which is not a point Genesis makes.<sup>8</sup>

From the beginning to the end of the Hebrew Bible the relationship between humankind and land affirms Israel's theological understanding of who they are as God's chosen people. Humankind, *adam*, is created from *adamah* (land) and forms a covenantal relationship with land, in which human dominion over it is to be exercised with responsibility and is subject to accountability (1.27–28; 2.7).<sup>9</sup> Thus land ethics plays a significant role for humanity as Genesis presents two histories concerning land: Genesis 1–11 is about people who experienced loss of land, and Genesis 12–50 presents Abraham and his family who did not have land but faithfully looked forward to having it and living in it.<sup>10</sup> For this reason, it is not surprising that Genesis frequently focuses on God's promise of land to Israel's patriarchs, as their faith deals with

4. The death of Christ on the cross is the ultimate solution for humankind's sin, but God's salvific work had already begun in Genesis.

5. *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* is an example of a positive Jewish assessment of Joseph, who was portrayed as a model person of chastity. Josephus also depicts Joseph positively.

6. Berel Dov Lerner, "Joseph the Unrighteous," *Judaism* 38 (1989), 278.

7. Terence E. Fretheim, *The Pentateuch* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 69.

8. For an example see Garnet Parris, "The Iconic Joseph: Contesting the African Migrant Churches' View of Joseph," *Black Theology* 9 (2011), 77–107. Parris's doctoral thesis deals with the African diaspora in Germany, where their members aspire to be like Joseph, who was a model case of a successful immigrant. Parris criticizes such an aspiration by pointing out that Joseph was an assimilationist who desired to be a better Egyptian than those around him at the expense of the enslaved Egyptians. See also John H. Walton, *Genesis*, The NIV Application Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 687–697, for another example of a faulty interpretation and application of Joseph's policies today.

9. Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 173. Sarna, 13.

10. *Ibid.*, 15.

journeying in and out of the land (e.g., 12.1; 15.7; 26.3–4; 28.15).<sup>11</sup> The rest of the Torah makes it clear that Israel's possession of land, *adamah*, is dependent on their Torah obedience (Lev 20.24; Deut 11.8–9, 17). In fact, the Torah begins with a reference to land (Gen 1 and 2)<sup>12</sup> and culminates with a reference to the "land of promise" (Deut 34.4).<sup>13</sup> The Prophets for the most part focus on explaining Israel's land loss as the result of Torah disobedience. As such, the Torah and the Prophets highlight a story of God's people with God's land as Israel's faith journey goes between *landlessness* (during wilderness and exilic period) and *landedness* (during Judges and monarchic period). Thus *adam* and *adamah* are inseparable, as land is foundational for humankind, especially for those living in an ancient agrarian society where land was the most important means of production, and landlessness would threaten their well-being.

In the ancient world, basically two classes existed: a dominant tribute-imposing class and a dominated tribute-bearing class. Most people lived in villages and were extremely poor while a small ruling class was extremely rich, and what we call middle class was typically nonexistent. Ancient empires like Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Persia conquered other nations and parasitically imposed a regime of domination that was characterized by grotesque economic exploitation, and their theology justified the brutal expansion policy.<sup>14</sup> Tax rates were high, and double taxation with a vengeance was common for the conquered people. Lands held by private individuals are attested, but for the most part kings and temples own most of land.<sup>15</sup>

Israel, in contrast, rejects such "political" or "temple" economy of the day as the Torah forbids landholding on the part of the king or the cult. Priests were to hold residential areas (Lev 25.32; Num 35.1–8), but neither they nor the king control the means of production in Israel.<sup>16</sup> To use Norman Gottwald's description, Israel was "born as an anti-imperial resistance movement that broke away from Egyptian and Canaanite domination to become a self-governing community of free peasants."<sup>17</sup> This rejection of the political economy is clearly noticeable in all parts of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>18</sup> When viewed from this perspective, Joseph's ruthless economic policies can hardly be justified as doing God's will. The Egyptian theory of government legitimated Pharaoh's land monopoly based on his

11. Christopher J.H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 78. Wright traces forty-six references to the divine promise to the patriarchs in the text from Genesis to Judges and points out that only seven do not mention the land, while twenty-nine mention it only. For example, in Genesis 28.4 the "blessing of Abraham" is simply synonymous with "possession of the land."

12. In Genesis 1 and 2 the Hebrew term *eretz* is used, and this term is usually translated as "earth" but also refers to "land," whereas *adamah* usually refers to arable land.

13. Brueggemann, *The Land*, xiii.

14. John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 102–103. Walton points out that Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) gods are geographically and geopolitically based but their power was not restricted to certain geographical areas. Just as a human king was capable of extending his territory, the ANE gods had the same ambition and capability, which was the "whole premise of imperialism." For the topic of ruthless political/temple economy in ANE history, see Richard A. Horsley, ed., *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008) and Marc Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Near East ca. 3000–323 BC*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007). B. Obed, *Mass Deportation and Deportees in the Neo-Assyrian Empire* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1979), 20. Obed shows that the Assyrian kings' inscriptions record the number of deportees and approximately 4.5 million people were deported by the Assyrian empire during its first three hundred years of reign.

15. For land tenure in Egypt, see David O'Connor, "The Social and Economic Organizations of Ancient Egyptian Temples," in *CANE*, 1:319–329. For Mesopotamia, see Norman Yoffee, "The Economy of Ancient Western Asia," in *CANE*, 3:1387–1399.

16. During the New Kingdom era the Egyptians did not seem to think all land should belong to their Pharaoh, but the great Harris Papyrus of Ramesses III shows that Egyptian temples owned one-eighth of the arable land of the Egyptian Empire. Thus Pharaoh and the temples of Egypt owned much of the land, and Pharaoh and his officials, especially the vizier, controlled the land. For more details, see Malte Römer, "Landholding," *OEA 2:255–258*.

17. Norman K. Gottwald, "Early Israel as an Anti-Imperial Community," in Horsley, *In the Shadow of Empire*, 9–24. He contends that this anti-imperial origin is the single most important factor for the survival of the Jews under centuries of foreign domination and persecution.

18. Undoubtedly, Exodus maybe the best example, but the Prophets also strongly opposed it. Good examples would be Isaiah 3.1–4.1, 5.7–10, Micah 4.1–4, and Jeremiah 9.23–24, to list just a few.

divinity, but Genesis democratizes the concept of divine image by declaring that everyone, not just kings as in the ANE worldview, is created in the divine image and thereby is entitled to landownership. Thus any oppression of human by means of a monopoly of landownership and enslavement is an insult to Yahweh (see Prov 14.31).

The Hebrew Bible establishes new land ethics in ancient world by promulgating a new land policy that avoids domination by a few elite of the society, as Israel's land theory declares Yahweh, Israel's king, owns the land and fairly distributes it to his people according to their needs (Num 26.52–56).<sup>19</sup> While the Torah does not offer systematic guidelines for land tenure, landownership in the ancient world was quite different from our understanding of it; ancient Israel broke away from the norm of the day by declaring Yahweh as the ultimate owner of the land who grants rights to it to Israel collectively as an everlasting inheritance. Thus we can conclude, based on Israel's new land ethics, that Genesis neither presents Joseph as a role model to be emulated nor endorses Joseph's economic policies.<sup>20</sup>

As mentioned in the beginning of this article, Genesis is full of accounts that are unjust with Israel's patriarchs portrayed as less than ideal, and sometimes pagans appear to be more ethical than the patriarchs (e.g., 20.1–18). Acts of the patriarchs are not necessarily divinely approved as they often committed acts of unfaith. What is clear in all parts of Genesis is God's faithfulness in keeping his covenant in spite of human imperfection on the patriarchs' part. Evidently, there is no clear criticism of Joseph's ruthless economic policies in the text, and the Egyptians actually expressed their appreciation for saving them. Besides, given normal practices, what Joseph did was not exactly outlandish, especially when the urgency of the situation was considered.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the Torah does not support Joseph's economic policies: a food monopoly, enslavement of the Egyptians, and centralized landownership. With the implementation of Joseph's economic policies, Pharaoh became "the paradigmatic enemy of the common good,"<sup>22</sup> and Joseph, its maker. We need to also keep in mind that Joseph's enslavement of the Egyptians is ominous; it foreshadows what was to come soon. Indeed, Joseph himself actually became the paradigmatic enemy to the common good. As what goes around comes around, when a new pharaoh who did not know of Joseph rose to power, the Israelites in turn became slaves to him (Exod 1.8–14).

So what does all this mean for us today? What are some implications of Joseph's economic policies in light of his own context and ours? The once-dominant ANE empires came and disappeared from history. Yet, having taken on different forms, empires still thrive, oppressions persist in the world, and ideologies continue to justify them. On the same token, our duty to reread and reassess biblical texts to do what is right and just in this ever-changing context is also unchanged.<sup>23</sup> New contexts call forth new responses and different priorities. After all, that is the whole purpose of God's election of Abraham: "For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just" (Gen 18.19a).

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19. Numbers includes two censuses: the first census (1.1–47) and the second census (26.1–52). The second census was taken so that the promised land could be distributed fairly according to each tribe's needs (26.52–56).

20. If indeed Genesis 37–50 ever existed independently as the Joseph novella, it would be possible to think of Joseph as a paradigmatic model of wisdom. In the final form of Genesis, however, that is not a primary point.

21. *ANET*, 168. For example, the Code of Hammurabi seems to allow the rent of a field to be as high as one-third or even one-half.

22. Walter Brueggemann, *Journey to the Common Good* (Louisville: WJK, 2010), 3.

23. Walter Brueggemann in his book *Out of Babylon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010) makes a very provoking observation. He argues contemporary United States mirrors empires like Babylon and Persia in its totalizing propensity. He argues that "doin' time in Babylon" requires a model of "exile and homecoming," which means leaving Babylon, but "the faithful church amid the U.S. empire" requires "agility of accommodation and resistance" because "the U.S. empire is everywhere." In other words, the faithful church needs wisdom to know when to accommodate and when to resist the empire. For more details, see his chapter on "Doin' Time in Persia."