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The Joseph Novella: Resources for Preaching and Teaching

Glenn Pemberton

As the preceding essays have demonstrated, many all-purpose and highly specific resources exist for what most interpreters call the Joseph novella (Gen 37–50). The intent of this essay is to point the way forward to sources especially helpful for preaching or teaching a portion or the whole of Joseph’s complex story. I frequently receive questions from former students who are about to embark on a series of sermons or classes and want to know what commentaries or other material will be most beneficial to their task. I write this essay with these young students in my mind, those new to the work of weekly class or sermon preparation. I also hope that those who have been around the block a few times will find something of value here (see Prov 1.4–5). I organize the essay in three parts: (1) recommendations regarding commentaries, (2) essays and book chapters devoted to part or all of Genesis 37–50, and (3) newer interpretive approaches. I make no claim to know everything available on the Joseph novella. So much is published these days that it is impossible to read or even skim everything on a given topic or text. Consequently, I do not offer a comprehensive list here. I only assess and offer the sources I do know by their potential contribution to our mutual task of conveying what this text has to say about God and the life of faith.

Commentaries

All commentaries are not created equal. For technical information regarding text-critical, linguistic, and translation issues, I would turn to Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Word Biblical Commentary 2 (Dallas: Word Books, 1994) and Claus Westermann, *Genesis 37–50*, Continental Commentaries (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002, from the original German edition of 1982). Then if I needed more on these issues, I would go to Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50* (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), and finally to the sparse and dated information in E.A. Speiser’s contribution to the Anchor Bible series, *Genesis* (New York: Doubleday, 1964).

Personally, I find the volumes in the Word Biblical Commentary, Anchor Bible, and Continental Commentary to be of little value beyond specialized matters of text, translation, structure, and genre. For the same reasons my set of Keil & Delitzsch’s Commentaries on the Old Testament also sits on my shelf in near mint condition. Unless one reads Hebrew and is engaged in a word-by-word study, these commentaries are unlikely to be of much help. The exception to this judgment is the extensive bibliographies we find in the Word Biblical Commentary and the Continental Commentaries for each textual unit (e.g., Gen 39:1–20). Even here, however, few teachers or preachers will have the time to pursue all of the potential sources in these lists. Personally, I look for the one or two items that stand out as holding special promise for my task.

The volumes in the New International Commentary on the Old Testament (NICOT), however, are of much greater value. They are readable (even without a knowledge of Hebrew) and work through the text in a careful manner with an eye always on theological significance, that is, asking what this means for the life of faith.

Derek Kidner’s volume, *Genesis*, in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1967) also reads the text to understand its testimony to God and faith, but it is too brief to

be of much help and its ideas will be redundant when using other better resources. Because time is of the essence for the volunteer and paid ministry staff alike, I would bypass Kidner's commentary and other short treatments of the text. I want to spend my time reading only the best commentaries, those who incorporate all of the insights from good but short treatments of the text. The three best commentaries I have found for understanding the Joseph novella and pointing the way toward application are Victor Hamilton (see above); W. Sibley Towner, *Genesis*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001) and Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation, Atlanta: John Knox, 1982).

This point in the essay is as good as any to mention what we are apt to find in most commentaries as well as other resources on Genesis. Those unfamiliar with the history of biblical interpretation may be confused by the phrase *documentary hypothesis* and source texts abbreviated *J*, *E*, *P*, and *D*. This terminology refers to a popular way of understanding the composition of the Pentateuch, in other words, originally how Moses used sources to compose the Pentateuch. Further study, however, soon led most interpreters (not all) to dismiss Moses as the author in favor of a later anonymous author(s) or editor(s). As a result, *source criticism* developed as a method to understand how the Pentateuch came to its present form in the Bible.

The documentary hypothesis asserts that editors ("redactors") wrote the Torah by using four earlier texts: *J* (for the *Yahwist* source, a German *Y* = an English *J*), *E* (for the *Elohist* source), *P* (for the *Priestly* source), and *D* (for *Deuteronomy* or the *Deuteronomistic* source). Popularized by Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918), the documentary hypothesis once dominated academic conversation regarding the composition of the Pentateuch—and is still part of most discussions, though no longer as highly favored.

Thankfully, for our work, the Joseph novella is not as subjected to source criticism as earlier texts in Genesis. Instead, interpreters recognize a different type of writing or compositional skill in Genesis 37–50: more complex in the inter-relationship of its text units and its development of characters and plot. Thus, most have come to regard Genesis 37–50 as the Joseph novella: a short novel (regardless if historically true or not), not the collection of earlier stories about the ancestors from *J*, *E*, *D*, or *P* (as in chapters 12–36). The best resources for learning more about the documentary hypothesis in Genesis and the Pentateuch are Bible dictionaries (see, *source criticism* or *documentary hypothesis*), the introductory matter in commentaries on Genesis (e.g., Victor Hamilton, *Genesis 1–17* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], 11–38), and introductions to the Old Testament such as that by William LaSor, David Allan Hubbard, and Frederic Bush (*Old Testament Survey*, Second Edition [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 6–13).

Essays and Book Chapters

Outside of commentaries that work systematically through the entire text of a book—essays and book chapters provide more focused (and often newer) research on specific texts or topics. For example, for quick access to information such as (1) historical context, (2) literary parallels, and (3) the history of interpretation of the Joseph novella see the following:

1. Historical context. John Walton and Victor Matthews, *Genesis–Deuteronomy*, in The IVP Bible Background Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997). Their volume conveys a variety of helpful contextual information, from cultural practices to major trade routes in the ancient Near East.
2. Walton and Matthews also draw attention to literary parallels, for example, the similarity between the Egyptian "Tale of Two Brothers" and the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife in Genesis 39. In addition to their summary of the Egyptian tale, a complete readable English translation of this story is available in Michael Coogan's, *A Reader of Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), a good investment for the study of much of the Old Testament.
3. For the history of early interpretation, I recommend James Kugel's *The Bible as it Was* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). Kugel provides a synopsis of ancient Jewish interpretation and strategic citations from the most important ancient interpretive traditions on the Pentateuch. For the Joseph novella, he includes two chapters, "Joseph's Ups and Downs" (Gen 37 and 39–41) and "Jacob's Sons in Egypt" (Gen 42–50). To give an idea of what these ancient traditions provide, we look to one

example pertaining to Genesis 37.2. Kugel points out that some interpreters drew attention to the statement that Joseph was a youth in the same verse that provided his age (37.2 NASB). Why is this repetition necessary? What does it mean? Kugel first cites Philo who explains, “For when he is keeping the flock with his illegitimate brothers [the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah], he is spoken of as young. . . . The ‘young’ disposition, then, is one that cannot as yet play the part of shepherd with its true-born brothers” (*On Sobriety*, 12–14). Kugel also quotes *Genesis Rabba*, “He was seventeen years old, yet [the text] says he was a ‘youth’? But this means he did deeds of youthful foolishness: he bedaubed his eyes and smoothed back his hair and raised his heel” (84:7). Even if we dismiss such comments as outlandish, Kugel opens a window to a wide vista of interpretive tradition from a time and place different than our own. If this ancient world of biblical interpretation is unfamiliar to the reader, Kugel’s opening chapter provides an excellent introduction (“The World of Ancient Biblical Interpreters”).

Other recommended chapters include more common historical-critical exegesis (or interpretation) that, again, I find helpful for teaching and preaching. Listed in no particular order: Victor Hamilton’s *Handbook on the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2nd edition, 2005) is an excellent resource for beginning a study of any section of the Pentateuch. In his chapter on Joseph, Hamilton raises good questions, even if he tends to like Joseph and defend his actions far more than I do. He provides references to relevant ancient Near Eastern texts and divides the material in a manner helpful for teaching. (His bibliographies are also excellent.) In *Embracing the Call of God: Finding Ourselves in Genesis* (Webb City, MO: Covenant Publishing, 2003), Rick Marrs devotes two chapters to the Joseph novella: “Life in and Out of the Pit” and “You Meant to Do Me Evil: God Meant to Do Me Good.” In these chapters, Marrs is even more dedicated to the task of teaching than Hamilton. Marrs shares the relevant historical context as he guides the reader through each major division of the text. He also supplies excellent discussion questions and gives constant attention to what the text has to do with living by faith, culminating with extensive reflection on “Finding Ourselves in Genesis” at the end of each chapter.

Newer Interpretive Approaches

Recent years have brought attention to the role of the reader and the creation of meaning when reading a text. In one extreme form, fundamentalist readings (not a new approach) regard the text as the repository of meaning from which a reader extracts meaning. Here, faithful reading allows the text to have full control of our “objective” understanding. At the other extreme, deconstruction and other postmodern approaches have challenged traditional forms of interpretation. For these interpreters (at the extreme), it is not the text but the reader who creates and controls meaning in the process of reading (i.e., alone a text does not have or control its meaning). Though unlikely as a first choice for readers of *Leaven*, in less extreme forms, recognition of how a reader’s social location affects his or her reading can be helpful to seeing a text with fresh eyes, sometimes providing interpretations that are corrective to fundamentalist readings that are blind to their own control over a text (in their “objective reading”).

One of these newer methods with special value for the Joseph novella is literary or narrative criticism (in this context *criticism* denotes a critical or thoughtful reading as opposed to blind acceptance of traditional interpretations or what an authoritative figure may say). Narrative criticism recognizes the interplay between text and reader: a text requires a reader and a reader needs a text and meaning comes from somewhere in the interaction between the two. This method of reading is well represented by the work of Robert Alter, David Gunn, and Dana Nolan Fewell (to name only a few). Robert Alter, a literary specialist, uses scenes from the Joseph novella to illustrate what he calls *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Harper Collins, 1981; winner of the National Jewish Book Award). I have repeatedly found his insights to be, in fact, eye-opening and would not consider teaching or preaching from the Joseph novella without rereading Alter (look for the many entries on *Joseph* in the index, p. 193). If *The Art of Biblical Narrative* is helpful, I recommend Alter’s more comprehensive treatment: *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W.W.Norton, 2004), his translation and abbreviated commentary on the Pentateuch. I also recommend David Gunn and Dana Nolan Fewell’s

exemplary essay, “Tamar and Judah: Genesis 38” in *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), and the passages about Joseph and his brothers in Meir Sternberg’s *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987; see pp 285–308, 394–402).

Finally, a word of encouragement: If we only read books written by authors we like and already agree with, we will stunt our spiritual growth and the growth of those we teach. So I close with an appeal: As a matter of principle, read a chapter or two that differs from your viewpoint, even if it does not move you to its viewpoint. And before you dismiss these chapters or essays, give them a fair hearing and consider thoughtfully why you disagree with their interpretation of the text (instead of merely reacting with “They are just wrong!”).

For example, assuming that more than half of those who teach or preach the Joseph novella are male, we might begin by listening to a woman’s voice. Women as characters are virtually absent in the Joseph novella. Only Tamar (Gen 38) and Potiphar’s wife (ch. 39) have much narrative space, with passing references to Asenath, Joseph’s wife (vv. 4.45, 50). Nonetheless, powerful readings from a female perspective are available for these stories as well as stories that do not include women. If men can speak of stories about women, surely women have something to add to stories about men. For Tamar’s tragic story, read Dana Nolan Fewell (with David Gunn) in *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (recommended earlier) and, for Potiphar’s wife, see Athalya Brenner’s “Lust is My Middle Name, I Have No Other: Madam Potiphar” in *I am... Biblical Women Tell Their Own Stories* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005). I also recommend the few pages on Genesis 37–50 and strong bibliographic leads in Alice Ogden Bellis’s *Helpmates, Harlots, Heroes: Women’s Stories in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994). And finally, for the entirety of the Joseph novella and future studies of other texts, a copy of *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2012) is well worth the investment.

Conclusion

I have not recommended selections from journal articles or monographs in this essay. On the one hand, I am unaware of a sustained treatment (monograph or book) of the Joseph novella that would be helpful for teaching or preaching; I am confident academic monographs do exist, but I would not recommend such a text for the task of teaching or preaching. On the other hand, the inconsistent availability of academic journals for readers of *Leaven* has led me to skip recommendations for journal articles. If, however, I was near a library (physically or via the internet) that granted me privileges. . . . I chuckle at the thought of having *so* much time back when I was in full-time ministry to chase down journal articles. Nonetheless, if you do have the time and the aspiration, I would begin with the bibliographies in the resources mentioned above and follow the best leads for as long as preparation time would allow.

My hope and prayer is that this essay as well as the recommendations or sources used by other writers in this volume will provide meaningful dialogue partners for those who will stand before others and lead them through Joseph’s story. May we see the Lord at work in Joseph’s life, even when Joseph could not see it and we struggle to see the Lord at work in our lives. May we come to understand the Lord’s way in Joseph’s world and in our own. May the Lord bless your listening to the text so that your speech will be faithful to the word and the people to whom you minister.

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