

IS GOD AMBIGUOUS? RELATIONAL EVIL AND
GOOD RECONCILIATION IN GENESIS 50:15-21

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INTRODUCTION

The problem of evil and suffering continues to be troublesome for unbelievers and believers alike. How can a good and powerful God allow suffering? Where is God in the midst of painful trouble? Why doesn't He do something about it? There are many kinds of evil that bring about suffering. Natural evil is caused by impersonal forces such as natural disasters of earthquakes, tornados and hurricanes, which leave physical pain, illness, injury and death as well as psychological pain of loss and disappointment. Other evils are caused by people. These evils can be inflicted by two agents: strangers and "relations". By relations, I mean those who have a personal relationship with the one inflicted, such as family, friends and acquaintances. This last category may be classified as "relational evil".

One of the most famous scriptural texts that addresses the problem of evil and suffering, and more specifically "relational evil", is found in Genesis 50:20, which declares, "But as for you, you meant evil against me; *but* God meant it for good in order to bring it about as *it is* this day, to save many people alive" (NKJV). Ross is on target when he claims, "Joseph's statement is one of the classic theological statements in the book."¹ This passage is all the more important when humans find themselves in situations of horrendous relational distress due to sin, often God may seem distant, hidden, ambiguous or even ambivalent.

The account found in Genesis 50:15-21 of the reconciliation of Joseph and his brothers is not only the revelation of the providence of God in the midst of lives of hatred and pain, but a moving account of repentance and forgiveness. This paper will seek to show through an exegetical analysis of this section the depth of this relationship between the relational evil and its consequences to the good of reconciliation and preservation moved by the providential hand of God. At the time, God and the truth of any relationally distressing situation may seem ambiguous, but they never really are in light of God's providence. The plans and intentions of Joseph and God may have appeared to be ambiguous, but they were far from it.

RELATIONAL EVIL AND THE CONTEXT AND STRUCTURE OF GENESIS 50:15-21

The context and structure of Moses' narrative is purposeful and pointed to the relational evil. It is the next to last narrative section in the book of Genesis recording the next to last words of Joseph. The Wenham aids in conceptually describing the relational emphasis having 50:15-21 as scene 6 of 7 from 48:1-50:26 entitled "The Last Days of Jacob and Joseph."² This section's dedication to the resolution of relational evil and this is supported by Livingston's evidence that this is one in a series of incidents of negotiation between ethnic or intertribal groups in Genesis.³ He sees a series

¹Allen P. Ross, *Creation & Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 716.

²Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1987) 460-1.

Scene 1: Jacob blesses Ephraim and Manasseh (48:1-22)

Scene 2: Jacob blesses his sons and dies (49:1-50:1)

Scene 3: Jacob is embalmed and mourned (50:2-3)

Scene 4: Pharaoh grants permission for Jacob's burial in Canaan (50:4-6)

Scene 5: Jacob buried in ancestral grave (50:7-14)

Scene 6: Joseph reassures his brothers (50:15-21)

Scene 7: Joseph's last deeds and words (50:22-26)

³G. Herbert Livingston, *The Pentateuch In Its Cultural Environment* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974), 248.

of nine negotiations in the Joseph narratives beginning in 47:1-12 going on until the end of the book (47:1-12, 13-17, 18-20, 21-26, 27-31; 48:1-22; 50:4-14, 15-21, 22-26). Each incident is comprised of an orientation to the negotiation, the bargaining, and the outcome of the negotiation. This would show that the central issue of this section is the relationship fracture between the two parties and the pursuit of peace between them.⁴

Westermann sees a definitive forgiveness in the reconciliation in chapter 45. It leads him to boldly argue that the repetition of Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers "has no necessary function in the course of the narrative."⁵ He does grant only a literary purpose this theme's repetition at the end the climax of the reconciliation with Joseph's explanation. Brueggemann, on the other hand, disagrees with von Rad and Noth that this is simply a bridge or a good place for a wisdom narrative, but argues that it is "an experiential reality in the faith of Israel, as presented in this narrative."⁶ It seems that all three bring important elements to understanding the relational context of this portion of the narrative. This section is a bridge in the narrative as has been seen above and verified by Brueggemann argues that the primary purpose of staging this speech is its careful placement at the seam between Exodus and Genesis.⁷ The preservation of the lives of the Hebrew people is thread that ties 50:15-21 not only to its place in Genesis but also to the Pentateuch and therefore the life of Israel as a whole.

What exactly is the scene here? No summary better describes the drama of this narrative than that given by Brueggemann.

The unit portrays an exchange between Joseph and the other sons of Jacob. Absent now is the third party to the triangle, the father who had always played a decisive, mediating role. And when that party is removed, relations between the two remaining parties must be reconfigured, and not without risk. It is that reconfiguration which is now reported. The space between Joseph and the others is ominous and ill-defined, filled with terror for the brothers. All parties know that the absence of their father matters enormously. And no doubt the terror consists largely with unresolved guilt. At the same time, Joseph is non-committal. When he is passionate with weeping and not at all cool (e.g., Gen. xlv 14, xlvi 29), we are not sure what it means. All parties are now set in a dangerous situation of rawness. Old guarantees, protections and conventions are removed. Now all parties must face the danger. And none knows beforehand how it will turn out. The risk in the family without the controlling presence of Jacob is not unlike every exile in which old systems of support have been lost.⁸

To fully grasp this relational drama this section must be analyzed structurally. Livingston's structure of 50:15-21 divides it into the orientation in 15, followed by the bargaining in 16-21a, and then the outcome of the bargaining in 21b.⁹ Livingston's structure may show a

⁴The key negotiation parallel to 50:15-21 is that which took place a generation earlier: Jacob's own reconciliation with Esau in Genesis 32.

⁵Claus Westermann, *Genesis 37-50: A Commentary*, translated by John J. Scullion S. J. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987), 204.

⁶Walter Brueggemann, "Genesis L 15-21: A Theological Exploration," *Congress Volume: Salamanca, 1983*, ed. J. A. Emerton, VTSup 36 (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 43.

⁷Brueggemann, "Genesis L 15-21: A Theological Exploration," 43.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Livingston, *The Pentateuch In Its Cultural Environment*, 248. Note: some start the section at 50:14 including the burial of Jacob and return of the family to Egypt. Cf. Harold G. Stigers, *A Commentary on Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 335;

Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale OT Commentaries, edited by D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), 224. This is a minority view.

similar pattern to other passages which have some sort of dialogue but the passage itself seems to follow a different structure. The brothers are the subject and Joseph is the object of most of the sentences and clauses from verse 15 to 18. On the other hand, Joseph is the subject and the brothers are the object of verses 19-21. This indicates a clear outline of two main parts with other dynamics happening under those two main sections. The following outline describes these dynamics.

- A. The Brothers' Repentance (15-18)
 - Situation: Saw that their father had died (15a)
 - Surmise: Joseph will repay us for the evil we did to him (15b) (or Syllogism)
 - Seeking Mercy (or Bargaining) (16-18)
 - Send Message to Joseph (16a)
 - Statement from Jacob (16b-17a) Please forgive them the transgression of the evil
 - Statement from Brothers #1(17b) Please forgive us the transgression
 - Emotional Response of Joseph (17c) He wept
 - Physical Response of Brothers (18a) They fell before them
 - Statement from Brothers #2 (18b) We are your slaves
- B. Joseph's Response (19-21)
 - Dispel fear (19a)
 - Describe God's plan for the problem of evil (20)
 - Dispel fear (21a)
 - Promise to Provide for them (21a)
 - Practice Comfort (21b)

RELATIONAL EVIL ASSUMED: THE BROTHERS' REPENTANCE (50:15-18)

The evidence of relational evil in the account occurs in the repentance in Joseph's brothers in verses 15-18. However, there is something equally important to the theological climax of the narrative in 50:20. Their repentance manifests itself in the midst of a specific situation: "When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead" (15a). Their sight in this context represented by *raah* in the text obviously means more than witnessing Jacob's death, but realized or "took in the full significance of the fact."¹⁰ This same idea is in Rachel's seeing or taking in the full significance of the fact that she had not born any children to Jacob, then she responded with an inappropriate attitude "she became jealous of her sister" (30:1). The brothers responded in a similar fashion.¹¹ Their tie to security was gone. This led them to surmise a scenario that leaves them blind to the true feelings and intentions of their brother Joseph and to the true workings of God.

¹⁰John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*. 2nd edition. ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1930), 539.

¹¹See also interesting development of this in M. Niehoff, "Do Biblical Characters Talk to Themselves? Narrative Modes of Representing Inner Speech in Early Biblical Fiction," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111 (1992): 577-595. He develops two kinds of inner speech or self-reflection: free indirect discourse and collective monologue of which this seems to be an example of the latter. See esp. 579.

The brothers surmise that Joseph will repay them for the all evil they did to him (15b). When they muse, “If Joseph will *hold a grudge* against us . . .”, *shatam* carries the idea of cherishing animosity against someone.¹² It occurs in earlier Genesis 27:41 of Esau bearing a grudge against Jacob, and in Genesis 49:23 in the poem of Jacob’s blessing of Joseph, which recounts Joseph’s persecution as archers who “shot at him and harassed him (‘shatam’).”¹³ Thus the term may also include harassment that results from the internal animosity. Since Joseph was prime minister of Egypt, their fears were not irrational. This adds to the ambiguity of the narrative.

In the second part of their musing over their circumstances (“And he will surely repay us all the evil which we did to him”), they strongly emphasize Joseph’s probable active retribution with the Hiphil Infinitive Absolute followed by the Hiphil Imperfect (“he will surely repay”) which Leupold translates “and should actually pay back.”¹⁴ The direct object of this verbal construction is “all of the evil.”¹⁵ Not only do they know exactly what they did, they start to show their acceptance of their personal responsibility in what they did to Joseph by stating, “which we did to him.” The verb *gamal* is one of a series of Hebrew verbs, which are expressions of giving, and in this case to do something to someone.¹⁶ These verbs may take two accusatives, one of a person and another of a thing. The *asher* used is the first accusative which refers to the preceding “all of the evil” (the thing) which is also the direct object shared with *yashiv* and the second is *otho* or “to him.” This seems to indicate that the brothers are strongly tying Joseph’s retribution to evil which they had done to him.

The “If” (*lu*) has been translated as either asseverative (“Surely”) or conditional (“What if”) in meaning. In taking it as conditional this sentence would not finish. The prothesis starting with “If” (*lu*) would be set forth, but there would be no apodosis. This may show that the utterance of the possibility of Joseph’s retribution left them feeling doomed or their silence shows that they stopped talking because they realized that there was no end to the possibilities for Joseph’s retribution.¹⁷ The asseverative use cited by Hamilton probably began with F. Notscher’s article, “Zu emphatischen Lamed,” in which he stated that “In Genesis 50:15, it is neither a question of a wish (optative) nor a condition, rather an apprehension of Joseph’s brothers. They say to themselves, ‘Surely Joseph will show himself antagonistic to us.’ One translates “See” thus the minor proposition falls completely apart from that, for ‘how’ the correspondence fails.”¹⁸ But the widely cited article on the asseverative *lu* in the Semitic languages states, “There is, in fact, only one likely candidate for asseverative *lu* in biblical Hebrew: *lu yistemenu yosep* (Genesis 50:15),

¹²BDB, 966.

¹³See also similar uses in Ps. 55:4 of David’s heart; and in Job 16:9 and 30:21 of his accusers.

¹⁴H. P. Leupold, *Exposition on Genesis*, Vol. 2, Chapters 20-50 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, [1942]1953), 1214.

¹⁵*raah* will be discussed later under v. 20.

¹⁶E. Kautzsch, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, Second Edition, translated by A. E. Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), 370-71.

¹⁷Leupold, *Exposition on Genesis*, Vol. 2, 1214. Leupold and Keil and Delitzsch call this absence of an apodosis, an “aposiopesis.” C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, Volume I: The Pentateuch*, translated by James Martin, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1951 [1900]), 411.

¹⁸F. Nötscher. “Zum Emphatischen Lamed,” *Vetus Testamentum* 3:374.

which some would render, ‘surely Joseph will despise.’”¹⁹ Here the author cites Nötscher. But he goes on to say, “However, this example may also be construed as a conditional protasis (‘if Joseph were to turn on us’). In view of the many other examples of conditional or optative *lu* the conditional interpretation is the more likely alternative.”²⁰ There are other examples elsewhere of the conditional construction without the apodosis (Josh. 7:7; Job 6:2).

Therefore, it is clear that by saying "What if . . ." the brothers are apprehensive and fearful over their own day of reckoning. They had never really confessed their sin openly up to this point. When they confess to each other their guilt concerning Joseph, which Reuben's reprimand follows in 42:21-22, the confession was only amongst themselves. Even though Joseph was listening they did not know his identity or that he could understand them. They were not willing to accept the full consequences of the relational evil, even though they had come to the realization that there would be some retribution.

At this point, they seem to sense that their only way of avoiding some hideous form of retribution from their famous brother is to seek mercy or bargain for his favor (16-18). Their first step is to send a message to Joseph (16a). In their fear based upon their unresolved relationship with Joseph, the brothers do not approach him directly but send a message to him (lit. “commanded” or “commissioned”)²¹ through a second party (possibly Benjamin).²² This is in parallel to how their own father Jacob had approached Esau in similar life and death circumstances (33:4f). Their second step is to give a statement of intercession from Jacob (16b-17a). The text gives no indication that this appeal to the unrecorded last wishes of Jacob is a “white lie.”²³ This statement seems to be based upon Jacob's discovery of what had happened. He must have had the relationship of Joseph and his other sons in mind during his last days (cf. 49:23a).²⁴

Janzen notes that the appeal in this section seems to be on a threefold basis: “(1) to Joseph’s relation to his father (he should obey his father’s request); (2) to Joseph’s relation to his brothers (he should have compassion on his own kin); and (3) to the brothers’ relation to the God of Joseph’s father.”²⁵ Most commentators note the fact that Jacob did not appeal to “my sons” but as “your brothers.” Janzen’s comment is helpful in tying it to its context.

¹⁹John Huehnergard, “Asseverative *la* and Hypothetical *lu/law* in Semitic,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 103 (1983): 571.

²⁰Ibid. Zlotowitz following Rashi takes an even different tack on the conditional, interpreting this as “Their inner thought was: If only Joseph would detest us and pay us back for all the harm which we have caused him! Then there would be no longer any trace of our sin and we would not fear that it might rebound against our children and our descendants” Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz, *Genesis: A New Translation With a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic and Rabbinic Sources*, Vol VI (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1981), 2214.

²¹*stawah* is used with an accusative of a person in the sense of “to charge” in Ex. 6:13; 25:22; Lev. 27:34; Deut. 1:3; Jer. 27:4; and Est. 4:10 and without the person expressed as here and in Esther 3:12 and 8:9. This does not necessarily support the late date of Genesis. The idea of sending is clear elsewhere as the Lord also commands or sends his blessing to His people (Lev. 25:21) even though no agent is expressed.

²²Leupold, 1214.

²³B. Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible: Genesis*, abridged, edited, and translated by Ernest I. Jacob and Walter Jacob (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1974), 340; See also Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, translated by John H. Marks (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), 427; as opposed to Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, 224.

²⁴*Contra* Arieh Ben Yoseph, “Joseph and His Brothers,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 21 (July 1993):158.

²⁵J. Gerald Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 12-50* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 202.

This may be because the evil they had done to Joseph arose over the question of which son stood in the closest relation to their father as eventual heir. In such a context, according to the character and customs of family and clan religion in those days, the brothers' concluding phrase, 'the servants of the God of your father,' is a formal recognition that it is now Joseph, and not any of the other brothers, on whom Jacob's mantle has rightfully fallen. This is confirmed when the brothers go on to say, 'Behold, we are your servants' (cf. Luke 15:18-19).²⁶

The brothers also appeal to Jacob as "your father" rather than "our father." B. Jacob views this as evidence that they are feeling contritely unworthy, admitting "only Joseph was a true son and that the father had been right in 'loving Joseph more than any of his children.'"²⁷ This interpretation is speculative. Nevertheless, these nuances seem to emphasize their contrition and their realization of the seriousness of their past evil.

Relational evil and its resolution are in the transcript of Jacob's request in verse 17 for Joseph forgive his brothers their evil transgression. The term for "transgression" (*pasha*) is used for the sin against others as in Jacob's protest against Laban: "What is my transgression?" The verb form carries the nuance of revolt or rebellion (e.g., of the nations: 1 Kings 12:19; 2 Kings 1:1; 3:5, 7, etc.; and against God in both the verb [Isa. 1:28; 46:8; 53:12, etc.] and noun forms [Isa 58:1; 59:12, etc.]). Leupold, Meek and Wenham translate it "crime." Thus, it is possible that this term would be appropriate to use toward Joseph who was now their superior and the heinousness of this act against humanity. "War crimes" come to mind. They beseech him to forgive this horrendous evil crime.

The word for "forgive" (from *nasa*) is used mostly with sin, but Hamilton cites that there are only two other uses when it involves asking it from another person besides here: Pharaoh from Moses in Exodus 10:17 and Saul from Samuel in 1 Samuel 15:25.²⁸ Janzen adds some insightful nuances to the forgiveness pictured here.²⁹ First, this petition shows their "religious logic of forgiveness" is located in the "bosom of family relations." The parental term of "God of your father" shows that their view of forgiveness ultimately rests in "the divine parental bosom." Further, as the brother's petition Joseph in their father's name, this follows the pattern of Jacob's own prayer in 32:9-12, which cites as its basis the God of his fathers. Moses follows the same pattern in Ex. 32:11-13 when he intercedes between God's anger and the sinful golden-calf-worshipping people. Paul uses the same pattern in Romans 11:28-30 "for the sake of the fathers" to be shown mercy after disobedience. Janzen concludes by saying, "In terms of the stages in the biblical narrative, it is thus God's divine parental relation to the ancestors, resting in God's election and the ancestral response, that is the matrix within which all problems are to be prayed about and finally resolved."³⁰

The brothers then simply follow the charge from their father with one of two statements of petition (17b). The first in essence states, "Please forgive us the transgression." They seem to

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible: Genesis*, 340.

²⁸Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50*, in the New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 700.

²⁹Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth*, 202-3.

³⁰Ibid., 203.

take on their father's intercessory request and make it their own.³¹

The emotional response of Joseph is that he wept (17c). This is both unexpected and expected. Joseph has wept on several occasions at this point: at his hearing the brothers' confession to each other of their sin against him (42:24); when he saw Benjamin (43:30); and before and after he revealed himself to his brothers (45:1-2, 14-15). His response shows how far revenge and retribution were from his mind.³² In light of other possible reasons, B. Jacob's words are poignant at this point:

He weeps because they believe a go-between necessary, because they are afraid of him because they think him capable of such an attitude, because he hears his father's voice. His youth which had been poisoned by their hatred rises up before him, and it is they who in their self-humiliation remind him of it. These his last tears are really theirs.³³

As the brothers fall before Joseph (18a), their physical response is followed by their second statement, "We are your slaves" (18b). In these actions and words, both of Joseph's earlier prophetic dreams concerning the submission of his brothers reach the height of their fulfillment. The dreams did not mention Joseph's responses. Based upon the pattern of Joseph's earlier emotional responses, the reader is not left to wonder if Joseph still might take vengeance in some way. Even though his weeping could be viewed as being out of pain and heartache.

The repentance of Joseph's brothers confirms the devastating occurrence of relational evil. Their visible means of protection from retribution had dissolved in the death of their father. They surmised that Joseph would repay them for their evil. Seeking forgiveness through negotiation sent them to their ultimate humility. Emotional and physical responses overcome the characters. Will the response of Joseph remain ambiguous? Will the God of Joseph's father remain unclear as to what He expects from the brothers?

THE AMBIGUITY OF JOSEPH AND GOD RESOLVED: THE RECONCILING RESPONSE OF JOSEPH (50:19-21)

As the narrative turns abruptly to its second half, Joseph's response dispels any notions of revenge from himself or their God (19-21). The first words out of his mouth are to dispel their fears (19a). Wenham picks up on the context and renders this "Your fears are groundless."³⁴ God is reintroduced as the proper theological focus with the rhetorical question, "Am I in the place of God?"³⁵ God has not been mentioned prior to the brother's repentant claim to be "the servants of the God of your father." Prior to that, God has not been overtly included since Jacob's blessing of Joseph in 49:23-25. It is there where God is described as "the Mighty One of Jacob," "the Shepherd," "the Stone of Israel," "the God of your father who helps you," and "the Almighty who blesses you." B. Jacob adds, "You speak to me as if I were. He may punish or revenge, but I

³¹Ibid., 202.

³²Keil and Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, 412.

³³Jacob, *Genesis*, 341.

³⁴Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 490.

³⁵Zlotowitz has this as an "incredulous rhetorical question" which is followed by most Jewish commentators. Zlotowitz, *Bereishis*, Vol. 6, 2221.

could not do it, even if I wanted it as I am only a man. Yet you also misunderstand God.”³⁶ Their misunderstanding is that vengeance is God’s to repay, if and when it is necessary (Deut 32:35; Rom 11:19). Keil and Delitzsch puts this statement in its context and renders it, “Am I in a position to interfere with the purposes of God, and not rather bound to submit to them myself?”³⁷ This principle is reiterated by the Apostle Paul and the Apostle Peter and again showing from a theological perspective the universality of this passage (Rom 12:19; 1 Thes 5:15; 1 Pet 4:19). We now have a good idea why Joseph was weeping.

50:20 is an axiomatic passage, which describes God’s plan for relational evil. “But as for you, you meant evil against me; *but* God meant it for good in order to bring it about as *it is* this day, to save many people alive” (NKJV). Westermann still has to admit, “This heavily weighted key sentence brings out the meaning of the Joseph story so clearly that one can understand this concluding appendage, vv. 15-21.”³⁸ “Planned” (*chashav*) is the same word in Genesis 15:6 when God reckoned Abraham’s faith as righteousness. In the Qal, it is used in Gen 38:15 when Judah considered Tamar to be a prostitute and other passages such as in Exodus 26:1, 31; 28:6, 15; 31:4; 35:32, 35; 38:15 of the tabernacle artisans, implying the implementation of the consideration. Thus Westermann is right to conclude that it “includes execution of the intent”³⁹ and thus it means “to do” or “to realize.”⁴⁰ Furthermore, the two parts of this first clause set in opposition to each other, both emphasize the individuals since “you” and “God” are placed before their verbs. Hence, this first part of the verse can be paraphrased as, “You, my brothers, implemented your evil plan against me, but God Himself implemented His good plan in spite of you.”

Good and evil are obviously important to the book of Genesis. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was created by God, guarded by His commandment to not eat from it, and violated by the disobedience of Eve and Adam (Gen 2:17; 3:1-7, 22). *Ra* and *Raah* is a huge word group numerically and theologically in the OT and in Genesis. It is a word that binds together the evil action with its consequence.⁴¹ The feminine noun *raah* (as it is here in 50:20) may be broken into two categories of evil.⁴² The first implies misery or distress and is used of Judah’s summation of what his father Jacob would say if Benjamin were to be brought back to Egypt, “you will bring my gray hair down to Sheol in *raah*” (NASB, “sorrow”). The second category implies injury or wrong and is used with “tov” as here in 26:29 of Abimelech’s seeking a covenant with Isaac. He said, “and let us make a covenant with you, that you will do us no harm, just as we have not touched you and have done nothing to you but good.” This is its usage in here Genesis 50. The use of *asa* (have done) is similar to Joseph’s brothers thinking in 50:15 “all the evil which we have done (*gamalnu*) to him.” More telling is Joseph’s own words to them over the “discovery” of the silver

³⁶Jacob, 341.

³⁷Keil and Delitzsch, 412.

³⁸Westermann, 205.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Hamilton, 701. A separate but related issue is addressed in Arnold Ages, “Why Didn’t Joseph Call Home?” *Bible Review*, 9 (Aug. 1993): 42-46. He states that this is “the paradigm of the Jew who lives in a non-Jewish culture so completely that he forgets to call home” 46.

⁴¹Robert B. Girdlestone, *Synonyms of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986 [1897]), 80.

⁴²BDB, 949.

cup in 44:4: “Why have you repaid⁴³ evil for good?” They all knew well the concept of Lex Talionis before it was written down by Moses. It must be noted that possibly included in the good is “God’s action in bringing guilt to forgiveness.”⁴⁴

This famous statement by Joseph is followed by a purpose or final infinitive clause,⁴⁵ which begins with *lemaan* (“in order to”). This infinitive construct is followed later by the subordinate infinitive purpose clause “in order to keep alive numerous people.” The strong sense of the purpose of God in the first part of the verse strongly carries over to the second part. In the middle of the second part of the verse is found the phrase “like this day” which most find ambiguous. Zlotowitz follows R’ Saadiah Gaon in translating it “In order to accomplish -- *it is as clear as this day* -- that a vast people be kept alive.”⁴⁶ In other words, it is an expression denoting exceptional clarity: God meant it for good “in order to accomplish what you are witnessing today, i.e., what is, in retrospect, now clear as this day.”⁴⁷ The brothers were not to miss the crucial truth behind all the evil: God is not ambiguous. He has a plan.

When Joseph placed this view of the events before his brothers, he was calling their focus away from their own sin and to the great providence of God.⁴⁸ Westermann aptly notes, “Joseph’s explanation, concentrated into a single sentence, embraces God’s action in the two circles of the Joseph narrative; it joins simultaneously God’s universal, life-preserving action with his forgiving action within a small group of people, the family of Jacob.”⁴⁹

It is interesting to note the commentators terms for God’s actions here toward the evil. Driver stated that God “overrules evil that good may come, and effects His purposes even though it may be without the knowledge and against the wishes of the actual agents.”⁵⁰ Von Rad states, “Even where no man could imagine it, God had all the strings in his hand.” Although it is stated that God incorporated man’s evil into his saving plan, how He did it is not.⁵¹ Some Jewish commentators deny that there was actual sin on the part of the brothers due to God’s providential guidance. They liken it to someone who intended to pass a cup of poison but inadvertently gave wine instead.⁵² But Zlotowitz summarizes Bias Yitzchak as citing the Sages (Kiddushim 81b) as teaching “that if someone meant to eat pork but picked up beef by mistake he must repent” but only if they intended to sin and not to use it for a mitzvah.⁵³ Perhaps Hamilton then is best when he simply states, “It appears then, that Joseph states that God took the evil his brothers planned against him and turned it into good.”⁵⁴

⁴³*Shilamtem* which is similar to 50:15 again “he will surely repay to us [*yashiv*].” Elsewhere in Genesis it seems to be used for ethical evil (cf. 39:9 of sin of adultery with Potiphar’s wife) but that does not seem to be the specific nuance here in chapter 50.

⁴⁴Westermann, *Genesis 37-50*, 205.

⁴⁵Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Conner, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 639.

⁴⁶Zlotowitz, *Genesis*, 2222.

⁴⁷*Ibid.* Wenham’s interpretation is similar as he translates the prior *aoh* as “it should happen” followed by “as it is today” Wenham, 456.

⁴⁸Stigers, *A Commentary on Genesis*, 336.

⁴⁹Westermann, *Genesis*, 37-50, 205.

⁵⁰Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 400.

⁵¹Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 427.

⁵²Zlotowitz, *Genesis*, 2221.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 2221-2222.

⁵⁴Hamilton, 706.

Joseph and the Scriptures never deny that actual evil exists. It happens to people, causing unbelievable and seemingly intolerable suffering. The evil is there. However, God is seen as the one who takes the evil that occurs with the intentions behind it and somehow in His mighty, sovereign and providential hand turns it into something that will bring about His ultimate purposes.⁵⁵ If he can turn something as relationally evil as this "war crime," something that happened in more than an instant, something that brought years of suffering and grief, helplessness and hopelessness, something that cost not only Joseph years of interaction with his father but cost his father the same price, then this is the ultimate in theodicy axioms.

At this point, however, the question of how this relates to the earlier statement by Joseph in 45:5-7 must be addressed. The NASB states, "And now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. . . . And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance." Why is this brought up again and are there any significant differences between the two passages? To begin, the emphases are different in that 50:15-21 is a variation of the theme of this earlier section. Skinner's point is stated well that it is "as if to emphasize the lesson of the whole story, that out of a base intent God brought good to His people."⁵⁶ Aalders notes that God's purpose is described differently. In chapter 45 Joseph emphasizes that he had been sent to Egypt for their benefit to put a "sheerit" or remnant in the land of God's chosen people.⁵⁷ Most importantly, Genesis 45 does not stress the overriding providence of God over the specific idea of relational evil ("raah"). Yet, Genesis 45 is also similar in its preserving lives in what is better translated "a great many survivors" (45:7; cf. Ex. 10:5). God's more ultimate purposes in this preservation of life are shown in both in the fact that this provided for the Jews to be able to grow in Egypt from 70 people into a nation-sized group at the time of the Exodus. In this it ties to the use of "preserve" in the flood account as well (6:19-20) showing that Joseph is an agent like Noah in God's miraculous salvific plan.⁵⁸ The Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 12 has of all the nations of the earth being blessed through Abraham's seed coming to pass and reiterated at the end of this section of the book of Genesis. Hamilton clearly states, "In an exhibition of tangible, spiritual maturity Joseph sees himself and his experiences in Egypt as the divinely appointed means of perpetuating the promises of God for the people of God."⁵⁹ This was a point that Moses must not have wanted the readers to miss.

Genesis 50:20, then, is important for the life of Israel. Driver said that this verse "brings out the didactic import of the narrative."⁶⁰ One can agree with von Rad's point that this narrative is connected to wisdom material,⁶¹ although not for the same reasons, since he would like to have

⁵⁵Acts 7:9-16 reiterates the Joseph story and states, "God was with him" (v. 9). Proverbs reiterates this theme several times. See 16:9; 19:21; 20:24; 21:30.

⁵⁶Skinner, 539.

⁵⁷G. Charles Aalders, *Genesis*, Vol. II, translated by William Heynen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 297.

⁵⁸Wenham, 428.

⁵⁹Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), 135.

⁶⁰Driver, *The Book of Genesis: with introduction and notes*, 398.

⁶¹Von Rad, 430-34. See also Psalm 105:22, "that he might teach his elders wisdom." See also Hamilton, *Genesis*, 706, on this discussion.

Genesis dated later and dependent upon its sources. However, God's wisdom throughout the history of Israel is the connection. It is a timeless truth contra von Rad,⁶² not only because it is God's Word but because God's actual salvation history of His people to the present has born witness to this fact.⁶³ It has always been important for the people of God to distinguish between their experiences and the interpretation of those experiences. However, modern interpreters must not distinguish too strongly between the experience of the people of God and their interpretation, which would jettison progressive revelation or implications that the early Hebrews had a strong view of God's providence.⁶⁴

A fitting climax to this scene is its resolution in the last verse. Joseph does not exact vengeance but again dispels their fears, which had been driving them to this confrontation (21a). That Joseph bases his words of comfort upon the axiom of God's providence over their evil in Joseph's use of *watah*, "and now" or "this being the case."⁶⁵

Joseph then, takes a further step in the reconciliation process as he promises to provide for them ("I will provide for you," 21a). The "I" placed before the verb is emphatic. In other words, "Joseph was promising something more personal than philanthropy."⁶⁶ "Provide" is same verb used for promising his father when he had him come to Egypt. In this case it is a Pilpel (which is a morphemic variant of the Piel)⁶⁷ of *kwl* which also has the idea of "nourish" or "sustain" those who need it (cf. 2 Sam 19:33, 34). His promises were then put into practice through his comfort and consolation (21b). When Joseph "spoke kindly to them" he literally "spoke unto their heart" with the Piel giving a sense of the deepness of concern and earnestness with which he spoke. The beauty of this moment draws the reader into the emotion and relief of the resolution and reconstruction of their relationship. Only those without an active conscience would relish vengeance and be disappointed with this conclusion. It is fitting that the two verbs here later occur together in Isaiah 40:1-2 as Isaiah opens the second half of his prophetic book, which stresses comfort, consolation and salvation for God's people through the Suffering Servant.

CONCLUSION

With the reconciliation and reconfiguration of the relationship between Joseph and his brothers, the future is left open upon the closing of this narrative. The last scene of Genesis has Joseph transmitting God's promise to Abraham to his brothers in 50:24. Twice the phrase "God will surely take care of you" (50:24, 25). White comments that

The final utterances which have been made possible by the restoration of trust and dialogue between Joseph and his brothers thus open a future which is certain only to the eyes of

⁶²Ibid., 427.

⁶³Fritsch states, "God was with Joseph for the saving of his people. God does not reveal himself simply that he may be known intellectually. The end of God's revelation is always salvation, or renewed fellowship between Creator and his creatures. That is why biblical history is redemptive history, for in this history God has unfolded in a special way his plan of redemption for the world" Charles T. Fritsch, "God Was With Him: A Theological Study of the Joseph Narrative," *Interpretation* 9 (Jan. 1955):34.

⁶⁴See for a discussion of this topic, John Rogerson, "Can A Doctrine of Providence Be Based on the Old Testament?" In *Ascribe to the Lord: Biblical and Other Essays in Memory of Peter C. Craigie*, edited by Lyle Eslinger and Glen Taylor, JSOT Sup. 67 (Sheffield : Academic Press, 1988) 529-43.

⁶⁵Westermann, 205.

⁶⁶Kidner, 224.

⁶⁷Waltke and O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 360.

faith. Every system utilized by the narrator to explain the actions of his characters, including the drive toward restoration of broken communication between Joseph and his brothers, is thus finally subordinated to the uttered promise and its open future.⁶⁸

This story is bigger than itself. It would later become a type of story, like those of Moses and David, which show “the crucial importance of the reconciliation of the Hero and the community.”⁶⁹

Thus the account found in Genesis 50:15-21 of the reconciliation of Joseph and his brothers is more than just a story of repentance and forgiveness, but of the revelation of the providence of God in the midst of lives of hatred, deception, fear and pain. Ross is surely correct when he states, Relationships among God's people may sometimes be tense, especially when, through death, leadership changes hands. But believers can use this to demonstrate God's sovereign design, even through human failures. They may do so through forgiveness and kindness.⁷⁰

Like two sides of the same coin, there is a deep relationship between relational evil and its consequences on one side, and the good reconciliation and preservation moved by the providential hand of God on the other. An understanding of this relationship should bring faith despite "war crimes" against our humanity, and despite the seeming ambiguity of God and the truth of any relationally distressing situation. God will surely take care of His people (Gen 50:24, 25) because He is with them (Acts 7:9). He can take transgressions implemented for relational evil and implement His good plan in spite of it.

⁶⁸Hugh C. White, “The Joseph Story: A Narrative Which ‘Consumes’ Its Content,” *Semeia* 31 (1985): 68.

⁶⁹J. Robin King, “The Joseph Story and Divine Politics: A Comparative Study of a Biographic Formula from the Ancient Near East,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106 (Dec. 1987): 593.

⁷⁰Allen P. Ross, *Creation & Blessing*, 716.

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