

The acts of God and restorative justice in the Joseph story

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Abstract

This article presents the narrator's and the characters' contesting views on the "acts of God" in the Joseph story (Genesis 37, 39–50) through the interpretive framework of Ricoeurian narrative theology, along with psychoanalytic theories, such as repression and *Nachträglichkeit*. After presenting the different static views on the acts of God by the narrator, Joseph's butler, and Joseph's brothers, the article offers a psychoanalytic reading of the gradual change in Joseph's view on the acts of God. It argues that (1) Joseph's delayed emotional reactions to his traumatic experience of being sold into slavery by his brothers are triggered by his subsequent encounters with them, which eventually lead to his radical resignification of his past traumatic experiences and misfortunes as the saving acts of God and (2) the restorative justice achieved between Joseph and his brothers at the end culminates in another insight on the "acts of God" as a form of transformative, healing power.

Keywords

Joseph story; acts of God; trauma; repression; Nachträglichkeit

Introduction

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the story of Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 37–50) is a passage of great research interest. The story contains numerous motifs on trauma, trauma-induced psychological struggles, and emotional reactions, as well as a wide range of affects (fear, anxiety, grief, jealousy, guilt, bitterness, and sadness). The main characters in the

story are overcome by the traumatic events of their past and developed different defensive mechanisms (such as avoidance and self-blaming) to reduce the psychological and emotional distress. Their traumatic past has been haunting them, affecting all their decisions and behaviours. All these motifs provide many interesting research topics for psychoanalytic criticism.

In this article, I will read the Joseph story (Genesis 37–50) synchronically within the interpretive framework of Ricoeurian narrative theology. Even though the story is a creative novelette, it is embedded with psychic struggles that are part of the common experiences of being humans. Thus, psychoanalytic criticism is warranted. The aim of this article is to engage the story critically and imaginatively with psychoanalytic theories to derive at a theological response to trauma.

Narrative theology in accordance with Paul Ricoeur's narrative hermeneutics differs from Han Frei's and George Lindbeck's conception of narrative theology. The former makes room for other critical lenses to the analysis of the narrative, while the latter emphasizes on arriving at theology based solely on the inner logic of the biblical texts.¹ This article adheres to Ricoeur's concept of narrative theology by incorporating psychoanalytic theories to the theological endeavour. Through the analysis of the narrator's and the four diegetic views on the "acts of God" presented by Joseph's butler, Joseph's brothers, the early Joseph, and the late Joseph, I argue that, through the narrative hermeneutics, Joseph's delayed emotional reactions to the early events of being sold by his brothers to slavery are triggered by his encounters with them later in his life. These encounters eventually lead to his radical resignification of his past traumatic experiences and misfortunes as the saving acts of God. Furthermore, the restorative justice between Joseph and his brothers achieved at the end of the story culminates in another insight on the "acts of God" as a form of transformative and healing power.

1 For the Ricoeurian conception of narrative theology, see Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols., trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984–1988); Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980): 169–90. For a succinct comparison and critique of the two types of narrative theology, see Gary L. Comstock, "Two Types of Narrative Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55 (1987):687–717.

A change in the portrayal of God from Genesis 37 onwards

In the book of Genesis, the Joseph story stands in a stark contrast with the preceding stories of the primeval age and the patriarchs in its portrayal of God. In Genesis 1–36, God is portrayed in mythological and anthropomorphic terms. God appears on the stage of human history, participates in human activities, and interacts with humans. He walks, talks, and eats just like a human being. However, in Genesis 37–50, such a God could no longer be found, except in a vision (46:2–4). The God in the Joseph story is a hidden mover of history, rather than an active participant. He does not even reveal his thought unless it is through media such as divination, dreams, and visions and as a rule of thumb not without the interpretation of an intermediary (see 40:8; 41:16, 25, 28, 32, 38–39). People in ancient Egypt and West Asia practiced oneiromancy and divination. They believed that these were channels that the gods communicated with the living. However, only intermediaries and wise men appointed by the gods were able to interpret dreams correctly. This belief is consistent with the cultural logic embedded in the Joseph story. Implicit in this assumption is that the divine will cannot be accessed directly, it could only be conveyed through divinatory media and interpreted by specialists. Thus, the story contains no unmediated, uninterpreted divine acts. The only exception to this rule is the vision that Jacob receives after he offered a sacrifice to God in 46:1–5a in which God speaks directly to Jacob.² The message is so clear that it requires no interpretation by an intermediary. Aside from this exception, the narrative's inner logic of a God whose acts in human history can only be understood and deliberated through interpretation, persists. The characters are left perplexed to ponder on God's acts. They strive in their attempt to understand God's doing in human experiences and activities. From a God who acts like a person in the primeval and

2 From a diachronic perspective, Genesis 46:1–5a, whose style and motifs are closer to the patriarchal story than to the Joseph novella, has been regarded as one of the texts inserted to provide a link to the patriarchal story. See Erhard Blum and Kristin Weingart, "The Joseph Story: Diaspora Novella or North-Israelite Narrative?" *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 129 (2017):506–07. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaw-2017-4003>. However, the diachronic issue is inconsequential to the theological endeavour of this article, since it does not breach the narrative logic of the Joseph story in its portrayal of an absent God whose acts are subject to human interpretation.

patriarchal stories, we now have a hidden God whose acts could only be comprehended through interpretation in the Joseph story.

Contesting views on the acts of God

The narrator's view on the acts of God (39:2–3; 21–23)

There are four contesting views on what constitutes the acts of God in the Joseph story. The narrator's view is reflected in chapter 39. The narrator twice attributes Joseph's success to divine favour. He emphasizes twice that Joseph's Egyptian master Potiphar is able to prosper through Joseph, because Yahweh is with Joseph (vv.2–3). After Joseph is falsely accused of raping his master's wife and imprisoned, the narrator again attributes the chief jailer's favouritism toward Joseph and Joseph's success in handling the prison affairs on the jailer's behalf to divine favour: "Yahweh was with Joseph and showed him favour [חַסֵּד]" (v.21) and "made whatever he did prosper" (v.23). The narrator emphasizes four times that Yahweh is with Joseph, which is the sole reason that he prospers.

It has been long debated if the Joseph story may be classified as "wisdom narrative," if it is influenced by the sapiential tradition, or if Joseph's successes are the results of his virtuous character and/or wise acts.³ Since Joseph's successes are the result of divine favour rather than his efforts or merits, the story departs from the typical act-consequence nexus of Proverbs (e.g., 10:4–5; 11:18; 12:3; 13:22, 25; 14:14, 19; 18:9; 22:4; 23:19–21; 28:25b) and thus loses the didactic flavour of the wisdom literature. The narrator regards Joseph's successes solely as the results of divine acts, out

3 See Gerhard von Rad, "The Joseph Narrative and Ancient Wisdom," in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1965), 292–300; James L. Crenshaw, "Method in Determining Wisdom Influence upon 'Historical' Literature," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (1969):135–37; Geroge W. Coats, "The Joseph Story and Ancient Wisdom: A Reappraisal," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 35 (1973):285–97; J. P. H. Wessels, "The Joseph Story as a Wisdom Novelette," *Old Testament Essays* 2 (1984):39–60; Michael V. Fox, "Wisdom in the Joseph Story," *Vetus Testamentum*, 51 (2001):26–41; Lindsay Wilson, *Joseph, Wise and Otherwise: The Intersection of Wisdom and Covenant in Genesis 37–50* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004), 7–27; Michael V. Fox, "Joseph and Wisdom," in *The Book of Genesis: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation*, ed. Craig A. Evans, Joel N. Lohr, and David L. Peterson (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 231–62.

of divine favour, and irrespective of his personal efforts and merits. In this regard, the Joseph story loses its didactic value to foster virtues or good deeds. As Michael V. Fox aptly points out,

The Joseph story does not adduce Joseph’s successes to demonstrate his wisdom. Rather, the author emphasizes that it was Yahweh who brought them about (xxxix 2f., 5, 23). To be sure, no sage would hesitate to ascribe good fortune to God’s favour, and there are several proverbs to that effect. Still, it cannot be said that Joseph exemplifies the role of wisdom in securing success. If his life were meant to teach this, there would have to be a causal connection between wisdom and reward. But this is lacking.⁴

Nevertheless, the narrator’s and Joseph’s contesting and conflicting views on the relationship between divine favour and personal success align with the basic characteristic of wisdom literature, that is the dissonance between orthodox beliefs and experience.⁵ In this regard, the Joseph story conforms to this key literary feature of the sapiential tradition. The narrator’s logic of success solely being the result of divine favour coincides with the tenets of “prosperity theology” of our times, even though the narrator does not tell us if personal failure or poverty is a result of divine disfavour or divine abandonment. I will argue below that Joseph’s radical understanding on God’s acts contests the narrator’s “prosperity theology” with the idea that even personal misfortune, affliction, or harmful acts of others may be interpreted in a favourable light as divine providence.

The butler’s view on the acts of God (43:16–23)

Joseph’s butler also provides an interpretation of what constitutes an “act of God.” When Joseph’s brothers first go to Egypt to buy grain for famine relief, Joseph plots a scheme to force his brothers to bring his full brother Benjamin to Egypt on their second visit by falsely accusing his brothers of espionage. He detains one of them in Egypt as a hostage but allows the rest

4 Michael V. Fox, “Wisdom in the Joseph Story,” 31.

5 See David Penchansky, *Understanding Wisdom Literature: Conflict and Dissonance in the Hebrew Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012); Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “Wealth and Poverty: System and Contradiction in Proverbs,” *Hebrew Studies* 33 (1992):25–36, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27909278>.

of his brothers to go home with the grain. He also gives orders to fill their bags with provisions for the journey and put the money they bring for the food purchase back into their bags (42:1–25). When the brothers find out that the money is in their bags, they are bewildered. They ask each other, “What is this that God has done to us?” (42:28) This question indicates their attempt to find an explanation to this perplexing incident by figuring out what God is doing. This is in accordance with the overall narrative logic of the Joseph story that God’s acts are subject to human interpretation.

On their second visit to Egypt, the brothers fear that they might be accused of thievery. They wish to return the money to Joseph’s butler (43:18–23). But the butler says to them, “Peace be with you! Do not be afraid, for your God and the God of your father must have put treasure in your bags. I have taken your money already” (v.23). In order to pacify the brothers’ fears and worries, the butler boldly translates Joseph’s order to put the money back in their bags as an act of God, thereby transforming a human act into a divine act. While the butler is not forthcoming with the brothers, theologically speaking he is not wrong, since the return of money to the brothers may be regarded as an act of almsgiving out of one’s piety to God. The cunningness of the butler is reminiscent of the portrayal of the servant in the Babylonian *Dialogue of Pessimism*,⁶ who is eager to support every act of his master and to provide rationale for it, however contradictory his master’s actions are. Incidentally, philanthropic acts are described as accumulating wealth in the heavenly treasury called “the basket of Marduk” in the *Dialogue*.⁷ To Joseph’s butler, a human act may be freely interpreted as an act of God for the benefit of others.

Joseph’s brothers’ view on the acts of God (42:21–22; 43:18; 44:1–17)

Another diegetic view on the acts of God belongs to Joseph’s brothers. The brothers interpret the forced detention of one of them as their well-deserved punishment for selling Joseph into slavery and their stony-hearted disregard to Joseph’s cry of distress. This understanding is in accordance

6 See Benjamin R. Foster, *From Distant Days: Myths, Tales, and Poetry of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Bethesda, MD: CDL, 1995), 370–72.

7 See Andrew Geist, “Marduk’s Basket and the Heavenly Treasury: Comparing Charity in the Dialogue of Pessimism and Sirach,” *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 21 (2021):161–84.

with the logic of *lex talionis* of the ancient West Asia. The *lex talionis* logic is emphasized twice in 42:21–22, first by the brothers and then by Reuben. Because they sold a brother to a distant land for slavery, now one of them is being kept in the distant land as a slave. Twenty years have elapsed; the brothers are still distraught and guilt stricken for what they had done to Joseph. In their mind, they deserve to be enslaved for selling Joseph into slavery.

On their second visit to Egypt, their fear of punishment is once again highlighted in the narrative. They worry that Joseph may be plotting to enslave them by planting the money back in their bags (43:18). Because they plotted against Joseph and sold him into slavery, now they are afraid of being schemed into slavery. When everything seems to go well and they are ready to go home, all of the sudden Benjamin is being accused of thievery by Joseph. In agony, Judah expresses his wish to be punished in the place of Benjamin. He says to Joseph, “What can we say to my lord? What else can we say? Can we still vindicate ourselves? *God has found the guilt of your servants*. Here we are, slaves of my lord, both we and the one in whose possession the cup has been found” (44:16; emphasis mine). Even Benjamin is the one who allegedly steals from Joseph, Judah feels all the brothers should be punished. To Judah, the entire incident is part of God’s retributive act in return for what they have done to Joseph (Gen 37). Judah’s wish to be punished by the principle of *lex talionis* is once again expressed in his long plea for the release of Benjamin in chapter 44. To prevent his father from experiencing the trauma of losing the second son given birth by his beloved late wife Rachel, Judah requests to be enslaved in Egypt in lieu of Benjamin (vv.16–34). Judah is not alone in anticipating divine retribution. From 42:21–22 and 50:15–21, we learn that other brothers also suffer from the same prolonged, unresolved guilt complex of selling Joseph and wish to be punished according to the principle of *lex talionis*. This reflects their understanding that a God who acts is a God who metes out rightful punishment in the manner of *lex talionis*.

Joseph’s early view on the acts of God (41:52–53)

Finally, the third and fourth diegetic views belong to Joseph. Joseph is the only character whose views on the acts of God have undergone revisions. What triggers his radical revision are his brothers’ visits to Egypt. Joseph’s

life is composed of a series of misfortunes. He has seen the dark side of human nature and suffered from forced enslavement and judicial injustice. Joseph appears to be a filial son – a helper of his father’s wives and an informant who reports his brothers’ bad deeds to his father (37:2). He is favoured by his father and given a multi-coloured coat (37:3), which, as Simon Moetara argues, signifies more than a sign of mere favouritism; it may also signify a token of successorship.⁸ In this regard, his brothers’ jealousy, and hatred toward Joseph (37:4) may be rooted in their father’s favouritism and choice of Joseph as his successor.

They hate him for dreaming of their bowing down to him. His brothers interpret the dream of sheaves as Joseph’s desire to challenge them and dominate over them (37:6–8). His father simply dismisses Joseph’s second dream of sun, moon, and stars bowing down his star (37:9–11) as ridiculous. To him, it would be impossible that his parents and brothers bow down to him. Jacob, however, makes a mental remark of the dream. While his brothers and father have correctly interpreted the real-life referents of the dream symbols. They have failed to interpret these dreams correctly, neither does Joseph know the meaning of these dreams. Events that transpire later reveal that these dreams are not about Joseph’s desire of dominance over his brothers and parents. These dreams are meant to foretell the future, pointing to the three acts of obeisance by his brothers (42:6; 43:26, 28) and one act of bowing by his father (47:31).⁹ While the power structure demands the brothers’ bowings to be read as obeisance, the father’s bowing conveys appreciation and gratitude. Joseph’s dreams further arouse the brothers’ murderous intent and instigate their plot against him.

After he is sold to Egypt, more misfortunes follow. His master’s wife accuses him of raping her. He is then wrongfully convicted and imprisoned for thirteen years (37:2; 41:46). Until Pharaoh has two dreams that no Egyptian dream interpreters could interpret is Joseph then called to interpret the dreams for Pharaoh. Joseph impresses Pharaoh with his

8 Simon Moetara, “Tutu Te Puehu and the Tears of Joseph,” *Ata: Journal of Psychotherapy Aotearoa New Zealand* 20 (2016):74.

9 The three times that his brothers bowed down to him are the fulfilment of his first dream. Note that the same Hebrew verb (חָתַם, *hishtap'al*) occurs in all incidents. The brothers’ falling (נָפַל, *qal*) to the ground in 44:14 is not counted, since it is reactionary rather than an intended obeisance.

dream interpretations, earns his trust, and becomes his viceroy. He then marries a daughter of an Egyptian priest and becomes the father of two sons. All the hurts and misfortunes have become bygones, and he finally lives a life of power and privileges. When his first son is born, Joseph names him Manasseh. “For God has made me forget all my hardship and my father’s house,” he says (41:52). When his second son is born, he names him Ephraim. He explains, “For God has made me prosperous in the land of my miseries” (41:53). As many scholars have noticed, the names of his sons suggest that Joseph has not quite overcome the traumatic events of the past, nor has he completely forgotten his family.¹⁰ A person who has let go of the past is unlikely to be preoccupied with the past, let alone name his sons after the unpleasant experiences. The naming suggests that Joseph desperately wishes to forget and may have tried hard to suppress the bitter memories of the past. The wish to forget often leads to an avoidance of stimuli that would trigger the recollection of the traumatic past, which is a coping mechanism to maintain psychic stability for the optimization of social functioning.¹¹ Joseph wishes that the prosperity and fortunes that he now enjoys would somehow offset the hardship and misfortunes of the past. However, contrary to his intent, they have served as a constant reminder of his unfortunate past. The naming of his sons also suggests that Joseph has difficulties forgetting the troubling past. He could only rely on God for forgetting. This means that in spite of his attempt to suppress the past, the memories and their effects linger on. To Joseph, to forget the traumatic events of the past is beyond human ability. It could only be done by the power of God. This is what constitutes an act of God for Joseph in the story up to this point.

10 For instance, Moetara, “Tutu Te Puehu and the Tears of Joseph,” 76; Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (London: Pandora, 1992), 174.

11 Samuel J. Mann, “Joseph and His Brothers: A Biblical Paradigm for the Optimal Handling of Traumatic Stress,” *Journal of Religion & Health* 40 (2001):335–42, doi:10.1023/A:1012564831769.

Joseph's radical new view on the acts of God and *Nachträglichkeit*

Joseph's radical change in his understanding on the acts of God does not come about until his brothers' arrival at Egypt. This breakthrough may be explained with a psychoanalytic concept, *Nachträglichkeit* or deferred action.¹² According to Sigmund Freud, the memory of a traumatic event happened early in life may be repressed. As a result, the physical and emotional reactions to the trauma are deferred until later experiences in life recall the traumatic event and intellectual maturity enables an understanding of the event that is hitherto impossible.¹³ *Nachträglichkeit* presupposes that the retroactive attribution of meaning to an earlier event is affected by later experiences.¹⁴ In a way, the future gives meaning to the past. An event happens early in life only becomes a trauma when later experiences bring forth its traumatic effects. In a broader sense, *Nachträglichkeit* is a hermeneutic principle that could well be applied to all events, not just traumatic events.¹⁵ This means that we tend to resignify an event from the past based on later experiences in life. It implies that understanding of an earlier event in life happens retroactively.

In Joseph's case, what triggers the traumatic reactions to the earlier events of throwing into the pit and being sold into slavery by his brothers is his brothers' visits to Egypt. The effects of the trauma are repressed for twenty years. Noticeably, Joseph did not show any emotions before his brothers' visits. The narrator refrains from sentimentalism and focuses on reporting

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- 12 Salman Akhtar, *Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), 231–32; Gregory Bistoën, Stijn Vanheule, and Stef Craps, "Nachträglichkeit: A Freudian Perspective on Delayed Traumatic Reactions," *Theory & Psychology* 24 (2014):668–87.
 - 13 Sigmund Freud, *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis* (1918b [1914]), in vol. 17 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1955), 38–44.
 - 14 Teresa de Lauretis, *Freud's Drive: Psychoanalysis, Literature and Film* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 118–119; Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 41–42.
 - 15 Haydée Faimberg, "A Plea for a Broader Concept of *Nachträglichkeit*," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 76 (2007):1221–40, <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2167-4086.2007.tb00303.x>. Haydée Faimberg argues for a broader concept of *Nachträglichkeit* in the sense of constructing meaning of earlier event based on later experiences, but she only explores the operation of *Nachträglichkeit* in clinical situations.

the series of events in a matter-of-fact manner until Joseph's encounters with his brothers. Joseph's affects, feelings, psychological struggles, and emotional responses to the earlier misfortunes and hardships are either unrevealed or absent, which may be interpreted as a sign of emotional detachment or numbness. However, the narrative begins to be loaded with excessive affects from chapter 42 and onwards.

Joseph's initial encounter (42:6–17) with his brothers in Egypt is an unpleasant one. He shows signs of alienation and antagonism against them. Joseph recognizes his brothers immediately but keeps his identity hidden from them and treats them like strangers. The encounter ends up in the brothers' imprisonment following by a brother being detained. Joseph's harsh treatment of the brothers may be read as an act of retaliation and a desire to inflict pain on those who inflicted pain on him. The brothers' bowing down to him and Reuben's guilt-stricken speech bring back Joseph's unwanted, repressed memories of the past – of how his dreams triggered their jealousy and how he was stripped naked, begging for their mercy, and left behind in the pit (37:5–11, 23–24; 42:6, 21–22). As the result, Joseph's repressed emotions are stirred up. After many years of hardship, Joseph finally cries. Once the repressed emotions are unleashed, he cries even harder and more, altogether seven times, and each time more intensive than the previous time (42:24; 43:30; 45:14; 46:29; 50:1, 17). This unleash of emotions is what Freud calls the return of the repressed.¹⁶

The initial encounter has also overwhelmed the brothers with grief and fear (42:35; 43:18). The motifs of the old grieving over the loss of the young and mourning in Sheol recur in chapters 42–50. After the brothers return home, they report what happened in Egypt to Jacob. Jacob is retraumatized with the loss of another son, Simeon, and stricken by grief. He becomes even more protective of Benjamin and refuses to let the brothers take him

16 Sigmund Freud, "The Neuro-Psychoses of Defence (1894a)," in vol.3 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1962), 47–49; Sigmund Freud, "Repression (1915d)," in vol. 14 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1957), 141–58; Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (1939a [1934–38]), in vol. 23 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1964), 124–27.

to Egypt to ransom Simeon (42:36–38; cf. 37:33–35). Jacob has never quite overcome the unresolved grief over losing Joseph. The perceived loss of Simeon and the fear of losing Benjamin (43:14) reflect a prolonged grief over the loss of Joseph. The motif of grief occurs again when the brothers anticipate Benjamin’s detention (44:13) and Jacob expresses his concerns about Benjamin’s safety (44:27–29).

The second encounter is told in a manner similar to the first. The narrator twice describes the brothers’ bowing down to Joseph (43:26–45:24). When Joseph sees his full brother Benjamin, he is overcome with emotions and weeps again in private (43:29–30). He tries to suppress his emotions and makes them unnoticeable by others (43:31). Joseph orders again to fill the brothers’ bags with provisions and put money on top (44:1). Instead of accusing the brothers of espionage, Joseph now accuses them of stealing a divination cup (44:2–3). Instead of Reuben recalling the pit scene, we have Judah recalling the past events. Judah recalls and pleads for the release of Benjamin to spare their father from losing his only remaining son, Benjamin, after the loss of his firstborn from his beloved late wife Rachel (44:18–34).

Many scholars have argued that the Judah-Tamar story in Genesis 38 is an integral part of the Joseph story, which serves to enrich our understanding of Judah’s character transformation in the subsequent chapters.¹⁷ However, the reminiscence between Judah’s grief and Jacob’s grief over the loss of their sons has not received adequate attention.¹⁸ The course of events described in chapter 38 should have happened before the brothers’ visits to Egypt.¹⁹ Judah’s losses of his two older sons and his fear of losing the remaining son Shelah from another premature death echo with Jacob’s own loss of Joseph and his paranoia over losing Benjamin, the only surviving

17 For instance, see Edward M. Curtis, “Genesis 38: its context (s) and function,” *Criswell Theological Review*, 5 (1991):247–57; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Word Biblical Commentary 2 (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1994), 363–65; Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 505–15; Richard J. Clifford, “Genesis 38: Its Contribution to the Jacob Story,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66 (2004):519–532; Jae Gu Kim, “The Literary Function of the Judah-Tamar Story (Gen. 38) in the Joseph Story,” *Korean Journal of Christian Studies* 75 (2011):43–61.

18 A notable exception: Jae Gu Kim, “The Literary Function of the Judah-Tamar Story (Gen. 38) in the Joseph Story,” 53–54.

19 Clifford, “Genesis 38: Its Contribution to the Jacob Story,” 526–27.

son of his late wife Rachel. Having walked through his father's shoes, Judah could truly understand Jacob's concerns and feelings. In describing his father's pain, grief and agony over the potential double loss of the two sons of Rachel, Judah is also speaking of his own losses. When Judah tells Joseph that his father would die should Benjamin leave him (44:20) and that their lives are bound to each other (44:31), not only is he describing Jacob and Benjamin: he is also speaking out of his own experience over his own fear of losing his only surviving son Shelah (38:11). The narrative gives a double *déjà vu* account, that is Judah is re-experiencing his own losses and fear through that of his father. Because Judah sees himself in Jacob, he could truly commiserate with him. Also, Judah's own losses would have made him realize how cruel he was to have taken a key role in selling Joseph into slavery and prompted the severance between the boy and his father. According to narrative logic, he would have believed that the death of his elder sons was the *lex talionis* punishment of God. His own losses would have triggered both grief and guilt. To prevent himself from re-experiencing the grief and guilt, Judah chooses the redemptive act of ransoming Benjamin with his own life. Similarly, Reuben offers to have both of his sons to be killed in case that the brothers could not bring Benjamin back (42:37) is attempt of projecting the double loss onto himself and subjecting himself to the similar grief that his father is experiencing. Reuben's suggestion is also a call for a *lex talionis* punishment.²⁰

After Judah's impassioned speech (44:18–34), Joseph is affected by a brother's heartfelt testimony and compunction, and he bursts into tears uncontrollably. The sudden influx of overwhelming emotions leaves Joseph no time to hide but to cry in the presence of his brothers (45:2; cf. 42:24; 43:30). He cries so loud that even the Egyptians and Pharaoh's household could hear him. The narrative has gradually progressed in sentimentality to prepare the reader for this moment of truth. After Joseph discloses his identity, the brothers fear even more. They are left dumbfounded and horrified (נבהלו; 45:3). Then Joseph attempts to comfort them by saying, "I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. Now, grieve no more, nor be angry with yourselves; for you sold me here, but God sent me

20 Both Judah's and Reuben's characterizations may be analysed with Heinz Kohut's self-psychology and Anna Freud's ego psychology. Unfortunately, the scope of this paper would not allow me to do so.

here before you for the preservation of life” (45:4b–5). Then he reiterates, “God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the land and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God” (45:7–8a). It might appear that Joseph resignifies the malicious and harmful acts of his brothers in order to appease their guilt and fear, just like his butler resignifies the recovery of the money to placate his brothers. While the pacifying effects are similar, only Joseph’s view constitutes a retroactive understanding. The two encounters that he has with his brothers make Joseph realize that without the hardships, misfortunes, and harms done to him in the past, his family and their clan would not have survived the famine. Even the malicious acts of others have been part of God’s act of deliverance. Such a radical understanding has completely toppled the binary opposition of good and evil, harming act and saving act. Joseph no longer needs to forget the past, because he has retroactively resignified the past in light of the events transpire later in life. The misfortunes and hurts of the past have somehow transformed into God’s blessings due to later events.

Joseph’s emotional outbursts and radical understanding of God’s acts align with Freud’s concept of *Nachträglichkeit*. Joseph’s deferred emotional reactions to a traumatic event inflicted upon him by his brothers would be a textbook example of *Nachträglichkeit*. The emotional outbursts are long overdue due to repression and suppression of unwanted affects. The series of misfortunes and challenges that he has faced subsequent to his enslavement would have kicked off his self-preservation instinct and direct all psychic energy to survival through the ordeals. Any disturbing emotions – bitterness, sadness, anguish, and fear – that may debilitate and incapacitate him are inhibited, deliberately suppressed, or unknowingly repressed for the sake of survival.²¹ His brothers’ appearance in Egypt triggers the return of the repressed, facilitates the discharge of long-repressed emotions, and forces Joseph to process his traumatic past. After this emotional and intellectual process, Joseph reaches his radical understanding of God’s acts. In psychoanalytic jargon, this dual process of emotional discharge and

21 Freud, “Repression,” 141–58.

intellectual awakening is called *catharsis*.²² According to Freud, “catharsis’ came about when the path to consciousness was opened and there was a normal discharge of affect” (emphasis original).²³ Joseph’s encounters with his brothers bring forth to his consciousness the repressed trauma of trapping in the gloomy pit and being sold into slavery by his brothers, an traumatic event that he has attempted to forget desperately, and effectuate the discharge of his suppressed emotions.

From *Nachträglichkeit* to restorative justice

Joseph’s radical understanding of God’s acts enables him to accept and forgive his tormenters. However, reconciliation demands the efforts of both parties. Joseph’s brothers did not take a step toward reconciliation until after their father’s death (50:15–21). Not until then are they willing to acknowledge the harms that they have done to Joseph and ask for his forgiveness. However, their plea for forgiveness is framed as their late father’s demand to Joseph. As the narrative suggests, the brothers may have done so to avoid deadly vengeance on the part of Joseph, whose position of power would make such possibility imaginable, especially Joseph would no longer have to be concerned about re-traumatizing his father with the loss of one of his sons. The brothers’ fear for Joseph’s vengeance and their desire for self-preservation are explicit stated in 50:15. According to the narrative’s inner logic, Jacob’s deathbed instruction must be fabricated by the brothers for the sake of immunity. Joseph weeps one last time after his brothers’ plea for immunity. The narrator does not tell us why Joseph weeps. This creates a narrative gap that engages the reader’s imagination. It may be interpreted that Joseph weeps because he realizes how much the perpetrators are haunted by the prolonged guilt and fear even after the victim has come to terms with the past. His tears and words are of compassion. He says to them, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God”

22 For a comprehensive review of the psychoanalytic concept of catharsis, see Adnan K. Abdulla, *Catharsis in Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985). The term “catharsis” purportedly first appears in Freud’s shorter writing; see Sigmund Freud, “Two Encyclopaedia Articles,” in vol. 18 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1955), 235–37.

23 Freud, “Two Encyclopaedia Articles,” 236.

(50:19). The Joseph story begins with Joseph's brothers' murderous intent and ends with the brothers' fear of Joseph's murderous retaliation. It begins with Joseph's forced enslavement and ends with the brother's plea for their own enslavement. It begins with the victim's begging for his life unheeded but ends with the victim's heed to the imploration of perpetrators. Above all, it ends with his unconditional acceptance of the guilt-stricken perpetrators and munificence to their children. Joseph's radical understanding of God's acts has brought forth a complete reversal.

For Joseph, even human's malicious acts can be retroactively understood as God's acts; even hardships and persecutions can be retroactively transformed into the saving acts of God. Such is Joseph's radical view on the acts of God. The Joseph story is a story about how hatred is transformed into peace and how a victim comes to reconcile with the perpetrators through retroactive understanding and cathartic discharge. The story implicitly acknowledges that this transformative, healing power could not have been a human act, but it could only be an act of God.²⁴

Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers may be regarded as a form of restorative justice, as opposed to retributive justice, in today's legal parlance. The goal of restorative justice is to involve the community in the process of reintegrating the victims and the offenders back into the society while ensuring that community standards of behaviour are upheld.²⁵ It places emphasis on reparation and restoration, rather than punishment, through mediated dialogues between the offenders and victims. Offenders are held accountable for the harms they caused to the victims through recompense – what traditional penal system could not achieve. According to Carrie J. Niebur Eisnaugle, similar concepts of restorative justice have long existed in Jewish and Christian traditions.²⁶ The key element within the Jewish

24 A caveat must be noted. Although suffering and persecution may be resignified in positive light, this does not mean that suffering and atrocities are to be legitimated. Suffering could still be a result of misfortunes, absurdity, and even injustice. We ought to continue to condemn injustice, human atrocities, and the persecution of the innocent, standing in solidarity with the wronged.

25 Kay Pranis, "A State Initiative Toward Restorative Justice: The Minnesota Experience," in *Restorative Justice: International Perspectives*, eds. Burt Galaway & Joe Hudson (Monsey, NY: Criminal Justice Press, 1996), 493–96.

26 Carrie J. Niebur Eisnaugle, "An International Truth Commission: Utilizing Restorative Justice as an Alternative to Retribution," *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law* 36

and Christian traditions is *forgiveness*. John Barton aptly observes that the Joseph story exemplifies this key element of restorative justice.²⁷ The Joseph story conveys the great transforming power of forgiveness. Joseph's forgiveness helps his brothers to overcome their guilt and to foster their remorse. As the result, everybody could move on the best they could be unhindered by the traumatic past or at least with minimized impact. Joseph's forgiveness toward his brothers is only made possible by his radical retroactive understanding of a God who acts even through human wrongs, misfortunes, and hardships. This understanding stands in contrast to his brothers' view of God as a God of unrelenting retribution.

Conclusion

What are the insights we can glean from the Joseph story by reading the story within the framework of Ricoeurian narrative theology and along with psychoanalytic theories? In the story, God has receded to the backstage, leaving the characters on the stage to ponder on God's acts. Through their diegetic views, it may be inferred that the characters, based on their roles in the society and their experiences in life, each have their own interpretation on the acts of God. The narrator's God acts in line with the tenets of prosperity theology. Joseph's butler freely interprets human activities as a channel of God's acts. Joseph's brothers, due to their prolonged, unresolved guilt, could only see a God who acts on retributive logic. These characters' views on God's acts are static and consistent throughout the narrative. In contrast, Joseph's view on God's acts changes with time. Before his encounters with his brothers, he has been tormented by his traumatic past and has wished so hard to suppress the unhappy memories with the help of God. After the encounters with his brothers, Joseph experiences deferred emotional reactions to the past trauma, as well as a retroactive understanding of divine providence through hardship,

(January 2003):212.

27 John Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Exploration* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 6–7; John Barton, *Ethics and the Old Testament: The 1997 Diocese of British Columbia John Albert Hall Lectures at the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society in the University of London* (London, UK: SCM, 2002), 105–06.

misfortunes, and even human harms. From a psychoanalytic perspective, both his gradually intensified emotional outbursts and his radical view on God's acts constitute a *Nachträglichkeit*. Both are part of the cathartic process towards healing. From a narrative theological perspective, we may call his retroactive understanding a revelation, one that leads towards the healing of the broken hearts, forgiveness of the perpetrators, reconciliation between the victim and his perpetrators, and above all towards the healing of the larger community. In this regard, The Joseph story culminates in a theological insight on the acts of God as a form of transformative, healing power.

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