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# Genesis 12-50 and Work

Theology of Work Project

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## Genesis 12-50 and Work

## Introduction to Genesis 12-50 and Work

Genesis chapters 12 through 50 tell about the life and work of Abraham, Sarah and their descendants. God called Abraham, Sarah, and their family to leave their homeland for the new country that God would show them. Along the way, God promised to make them a great nation, “in whom all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). As Abraham’s spiritual descendants, blessed by this great family and brought to faith through their descendant Jesus Christ, we are called to follow in the footsteps of the faith of the father and mother of all who truly believe (Romans 4:11; Galatians 3:7, 29).

The story of Abraham and Sarah’s family is perfused with work. Their work encompasses nearly every facet of the work of semi-nomadic peoples in the Ancient Near East. At every point, they face crucial questions about *how* to live and work in faithful observance of God’s covenant. They struggle to make a living, endure social upheaval, raise children in safety, and remain faithful to God in the midst of a broken world, much as we do today. They find that God is faithful to his promise to bless them in all circumstances, although they themselves prove faithless again and again.

But the purpose of God’s covenant is not merely to bless Abraham’s family in a hostile world. Instead, he intends to bless the whole world through these people. This task is beyond the abilities of Abraham’s family, who fall again and again into pride, self-centeredness, foolhardiness, anger, and every other malady to which fallen people are apt. We recognize ourselves in them in this aspect too. Yet by God’s grace, they retain a core of faithfulness to the covenant, and God works through the work of these people, beset with faults, to bring unimaginable blessings to the world. Like theirs, our work also brings blessings to those around us because in our work we participate in God’s work in the world.

When seen from beginning to end, it is clear that Genesis is a literary whole, yet it falls into two distinct parts. The first part (Genesis 1-11) deals with God’s creation of the universe, then traces the development of mankind from the original couple in the Garden of Eden to the three sons of Noah and their families who spread out into the world. This section closes on a low note when people from the whole world gather in unity to construct a city to make a name for themselves and instead experience defeat, confusion and scattering as judgment from God. The second part (Gen. 12-50) opens with the Lord’s call to the particular man, Abraham. **[1]** God called him to leave his homeland and family to set

out for a new life and land, which he did. The rest of the book follows the life of this man and the next three generations who begin to experience the fulfillment of the divine promises made to their father Abraham.

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## Abraham (Genesis 12:1-25:11)

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### Abraham's faithfulness contrasted with the faithlessness of Babel (Genesis 12:1-3)

God called Abraham into a covenant of faithful service, as is told at the beginning of chapter 12. By leaving the territory of his faithless extended family and following God's call, Abraham distinguished himself sharply from his distant relatives who stayed in Mesopotamia and attempted to build the Tower of Babel, as was told at the close of Genesis 11. The comparison between Abraham's immediate family in chapter 12 and Noah's other descendants in chapter 11 highlights five contrasts.

First, Abraham puts his trust in God's guidance, rather than on human device. In contrast, the tower builders believed that by their own skill and ingenuity, they could devise a tower "with its top in the heavens" (Gen. 11:3), and in so doing achieve significance and security in a way that usurped God's authority.<sup>[2]</sup>

Second, the builders sought to make a name for themselves (Gen. 11:4), but Abraham trusted God's promise that *he* would make Abraham's name great (Gen. 12:2). The difference was not the desire to achieve greatness, per se, but the desire to pursue fame on one's own terms. God did indeed make Abraham famous, not for his own sake, but in order that "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). The builders sought fame for their own sake, yet they remain anonymous to this day.

Third, Abraham was willing to go wherever God led him, while the builders attempted to huddle together in their accustomed space. They created their project out of fear that they would be scattered across the earth (Gen. 11:4). In doing so, they rejected God's purpose for humanity to "fill the earth" (Gen. 1:28). They seem to have feared that spreading out in an apparently hostile world would be too difficult for them. They were creative and technologically innovative (Gen. 11:3), but they were unwilling to fully embrace God's purpose for them to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28). Their fear of engaging the fullness of creation coincided with their decision to substitute human ingenuity for God's guidance and grace. When we cease to aspire for more than we can attain on our own, our aspirations become insignificant.

By contrast, God made Abraham into the original entrepreneur, always moving on to fresh endeavors in new locations. God called him away from the city of Haran toward the land of Canaan where Abraham would never settle into a fixed address. He was known as a "wandering Aramean" (Deuteronomy 26:5).

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This lifestyle was inherently more God-centered in that Abraham would have to depend on God's word and leadership in order to find his significance, security, and success. As Hebrews 11:8 puts it, he had to "set out, not knowing where he was going." In the world of work, believers must perceive the contrast in these two fundamental orientations. All work entails planning and building. Ungodly work stems from the desire to depend on no one but ourselves, and it restricts itself narrowly to benefit only ourselves and the few who may be close to us. Godly work is willing to depend on God's guidance and authority, and it desires to grow widely as a blessing to all the world.

Fourth, Abraham was willing to let God lead him into new relationships, while the tower builders sought to close themselves off in a guarded fortress, Abraham trusted God's promise that his family would grow into a great nation (Genesis 12:2; 15:5). Though they lived among strangers in the land of Canaan (Gen. 17:8), they had good relationships with those they came in contact with (Gen. 21:22-34; 23:1-12). This is the gift of community. Another key theme thus emerges for the theology of work. God's design is for people to work in healthy networks of relationship.

Finally, Abraham was blessed with the patience to take a long-term view. God's promises were to be realized in the time of Abraham's offspring, not in the time of Abraham himself. The Apostle Paul interpreted the "offspring" to be Jesus (Galatians 3:19), meaning that the payoff date was more than 1000 years in the future. In fact, the promise to Abraham will not be fulfilled completely until the return of Christ (Matthew 24:30-31). Its progress cannot be adequately measured by quarterly reports! The tower builders, in comparison, took no thought for how their project would affect future generations, and God criticized them explicitly for this lapse (Genesis 11:6).

In sum, God promised Abraham fame, fruitfulness, and good relationships, by which means he and his family would bless the whole world, and in due course be blessed themselves beyond imagining (Gen. 22:17). Unlike others, Abraham realized that an attempt to grasp such things on his own power would be futile, or worse. Instead he trusted God and depended every day on God's guidance and provision (Gen. 22:8-14). Although these promises were not fully realized by the end of Genesis, they initiated the covenant between God and the people of God through which the redemption of the world will come to completion in the Day of Christ (Philippians 1:10).

God promised a new land to Abraham's family. Making use of land requires many kinds work, so a gift of land reiterates that work is an essential sphere of God's concern. Working the land would require occupational skills of shepherding, tent-making, military protection, and the production of a wide array of goods and services. Moreover, Abraham's descendants would become a populous nation whose members would be as innumerable as the stars in the sky. This would require the work of developing personal relationships, parenting, politics, diplomacy and administration, education, the healing arts and other social occupations. Third, to bring such blessings to all the earth, God called Abraham and his descendants to "walk before me and be blameless" (Genesis 17:1). This requires the work of

worship, atonement, discipleship and other religious occupations. Fourth, Joseph's work was to create a solution responding to the impact of the famine, and sometimes our work is to heal brokenness. All these types of work, and the workers who engage in them, come under God's authority, guidance and provision.

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## The Pastoral Lifestyle of Abraham and his Family (Genesis 12:4-7)

When Abraham left his home in Haran and set out for the land of Canaan, his family was probably already quite large by modern standards. We know that his wife Sarah and his nephew Lot came with him, but so did an unspecified number of people and possessions (Gen. 12:5). Soon Abraham would become very wealthy, having acquired servants and livestock as well as silver and gold (Gen. 12:16, 13:2). He received people and animals from the Pharaoh during his stay in Egypt, and the precious metals would have been the result of commercial transactions, indicating the Lord as the ultimate one to bestow blessing.<sup>[3]</sup> Evidence that both Abraham and Lot had become so successful lies in the quarreling that broke out between the herders for each family over the inability of the land to support so many grazing animals. Eventually, the two had to part company in order to support their business activities (Gen. 13:11).

Anthropological studies of this period and region suggest the families in these narratives practiced a mix of semi-nomadic pastoralism and herdsman husbandry (Gen. 13:5-12; 21:25-34; 26:17-33; 29:1-10; 37:12-17).<sup>[4]</sup> These families needed seasonal mobility and thus lived in tents of leather, felt, and wool. They owned property that could be borne by donkeys or, if one was wealthy enough, also camels. Finding the balance between the optimal availability of usable pasture land and water required good judgment and intimate knowledge of weather and geography. The wetter months of October through March afforded grazing on the lower plains, while in the warmer and drier months of April through September the shepherds would take their flocks to higher elevations for greener vegetation and flowing springs.<sup>[5]</sup> Because a family could not be entirely supported through shepherding, it was necessary to practice local agriculture and trade with those living in more settled communities.<sup>[6]</sup>

Pastoral nomads cared for sheep and goats to obtain milk and meat (Gen. 18:7-8; 27:9; 31:38), wool, and other goods made from animal products, such as leather. Donkeys carried loads (Gen. 42:26) and camels were especially suited for long-range travel (Gen. 24:10, 64; 31:17). The skills required to maintain these herds would have involved grazing and watering, birthing, treating the sick and injured, protecting animals from predators and thieves, as well as locating strays.

Fluctuations in weather and the size of growth in the population of the flocks and herds would have affected the economy of the region. Weaker groups of shepherds could easily become displaced or assimilated at the expense of those who needed more territory for their expanding holdings.<sup>[7]</sup> Profit

from shepherding was not stored as accumulated savings or investments on behalf of the owners and managers, but shared throughout the family. By the same token, the effects of hardship due to famine conditions would have been felt by all. While individuals certainly had their own responsibilities and were accountable for their actions, the communal nature of the family business generally stands apart from our contemporary culture of personal achievement and the expectation to show ever-increasing profits. Social responsibility would have been a daily concern, not an option.

In this way of life, shared values were essential for survival. Mutual dependence among the members of a family or tribe and awareness of their common ancestry would have resulted in great solidarity as well as vengeful hostility toward anyone who would disrupt it (Gen. 34:25-31).<sup>[8]</sup> Leaders had to know how to tap the wisdom of the group in order to make sound decisions about where to travel, how long to stay, and how to divide the herds.<sup>[9]</sup> They must have ways of communicating with shepherds who have taken the flocks away at some distance (Gen. 37:12-13). Conflict-resolution skills were necessary to settle inevitable disputes over grazing land and water rights to wells and springs (Gen. 26:19-22). The high mobility of life in the country and one's vulnerability to marauders made hospitality much more than a courtesy. It was generally considered a requirement of decent people to offer refreshment, food, and lodging.<sup>[10]</sup>

The patriarchal narratives repeatedly mention the great wealth of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen. 13:2; 26:13; 31:1). Shepherding and animal husbandry were honorable fields of work and could be lucrative. Abraham's family became very wealthy. For example, to soften the attitude of his offended brother Esau prior to their meeting after a long time, Jacob was able to select from his property a gift of at least 550 animals: 200 female goats with 20 males, 200 ewes with 20 rams, 30 female camels with their calves, 40 cows with 10 bulls, and 20 female donkeys with 10 males (Gen. 32:13-15). It is therefore fitting that at the end of his life when Jacob conferred blessings on his sons, he testified that the God of his fathers had been "my shepherd all my life to this day" (Gen. 49:15). Although many passages in the Bible warn that wealth is often inimical to faithfulness (e.g., Jeremiah 17:11, Habakkuk 2:5, Matthew 6:24), Abraham's experience shows that God's faithfulness can be expressed in prosperity as well. As we shall see, this is by no means a promise that God's people should expect prosperity on a continuous basis.

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## Abraham's journey begins with disaster in Egypt (Genesis 12:8-13:2)

The initial results of Abraham's journeys were not promising. There was fierce competition for the land (Genesis 12:6) and Abraham spent a long time trying to find a niche to occupy (Gen. 12:8-9). Eventually deteriorating economic conditions forced him to pull out entirely and take his family to Egypt, hundreds of miles away from the land of God's promise (Gen. 12:10).

As an economic migrant to Egypt, Abraham's vulnerable position made him fearful. He feared that the Egyptians might murder him to obtain his beautiful wife, Sarah. To prevent this, Abraham told Sarah to claim that she was his sister rather than his wife. As Abraham anticipated, one of the Egyptians—the Pharaoh, in fact—did desire Sarah and she “was taken into Pharaoh's house.” As a result “the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues” (Gen. 12:17). When Pharaoh found out the reason—that he had taken another man's wife—he returned Sarah to Abraham and immediately ordered them both to depart his country (Gen. 12:18-19). Nevertheless, Pharaoh enriched them with sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, male and female servants as well as camels (Gen. 12:16) and silver and gold (Gen. 13:2), a further indication that Abraham's wealth (Gen. 13:2) was due to royal gifts.<sup>[11]</sup>

This incident dramatically indicates both the moral quandaries posed by great disparities in wealth and poverty and the dangers of losing faith in the face of such problems. Abraham and Sarah were fleeing starvation, and they were vulnerable as non-citizens in a foreign country. It may be hard to imagine being so desperately poor or afraid that a family would subject its female members to sexual liaisons in order to survive economically, but even today millions face this choice. God punishes Pharaoh for accepting sexual favors from this vulnerable woman and her family. Pharaoh in his state of shame berates Abraham for making it seem as though Sarah was acting voluntarily. But God does not accept Pharaoh's excuse. When Abraham does the same thing again later with king Abimelech (Gen. 20:7-17), God honors Abimelech for declining to receive Sarah into his bed. In both episodes, God places the responsibility for sexual exploitation squarely with the intended recipients. Pharaoh—who willingly believes that Sarah is happy to engage in the liaison—is punished, while Abimelech—who takes the trouble to uncover the ruse—is praised. God even moves Abimelech to rescue Sarah and her family from their situation, so they are never again in danger of sexual exploitation.

Abraham's vulnerability and fear make his actions understandable. Nonetheless, Abraham had received God's direct promise, “I will make of you a great nation” (Gen. 12:2). Why did Abraham's faith in God to make good on his promises fail so quickly? Did survival really require him to lie to kings and direct his wife to become a concubine, or would God have provided another way? Abraham's fears seem to have made him forget his trust in God's faithfulness. Similarly people in difficult situations often convince themselves they have no choice but to do something they regard as wrong. But unpleasant choices, no matter our feelings about them, are not the same as having no choice at all. Even so, God does not say anything against Abraham or Sarah for falling into sexual exploitation. Instead, he listens to their prayers (Gen. 20:17). Sex-for-hire (in whatever form) is contrary to God's ways, but God's compassion leads to rescue, not judgment, for those who are exploited.

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## Abraham and Lot parted (Genesis 13:3-18)



When Abraham and his family re-entered Canaan and came to the region around Bethel, the friction that erupted between the herders of Abraham and those of his nephew Lot posed Abraham a choice regarding the scarcity of land. A division had to be made and Abraham took the risk of offering Lot first choice of the real-estate. The central ridge of land in Canaan is rocky and does support much vegetation for grazing. Lot's eye fell to the east and the plain around the Jordan River which he regarded as "like the garden of the Lord" so he chose this better portion for himself (Gen. 13:10). Abraham's trust in God released him from the anxiety of looking out for himself. No matter how Abraham and Lot would prosper in the future, the fact that Abraham let Lot make the choice displayed generosity and established trust between him and Lot.

Generosity is a positive trait in both personal and business relationships. Perhaps nothing establishes trust and good relationships as solidly as generosity. Colleagues, customers, suppliers, even adversaries, respond strongly to generosity and remember it for a long time. When Zacchaeus the tax collector welcomed Jesus into his home and promised to give half of his possessions to the poor and to repay fourfold those he had cheated, Jesus called him a "son of Abraham" for his generosity and fruit of repentance (Luke 19:9). Zacchaeus was responding, of course, to the relational generosity of Jesus, who had unexpectedly, and uncharacteristically for the people of that time, opened his heart to a detested tax collector.

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## Abraham and Sarah's hospitality (Genesis 18:1-15)

The story of Abraham and Sarah's generous hospitality to three visitors who came to them by the oaks of Mamre is told in Genesis chapter 18. Semi-nomadic life in the country would often bring people from different families into contact with one another, and the character of Canaan as a natural land bridge between Asia and Africa made it a popular trade route. In the absence of a formal industry of hospitality, people living in cities and encampments had a social obligation to welcome strangers. From Old Testament descriptions and other ancient near eastern texts, Matthews derived seven codes of conduct defining what counts for good hospitality that maintains the honor of persons, their households, and communities by receiving and offering protection to strangers.<sup>[12]</sup> Around a settlement was a zone in which the individuals and the town were obliged to show hospitality.

1. In this zone, the villagers were responsible to offer hospitality to strangers.
2. The stranger must be transformed from being a potential threat to becoming an ally by the offer of hospitality.
3. Only the male head of household or a male citizen of a town or village may offer the invitation of hospitality.
4. The invitation may include a time span statement for the period of hospitality, but this can then be extended, if agreeable to both parties, on the renewed invitation of the host.
5. The stranger has the right of refusal, but this could be considered an affront to the honor of the host



- and could be a cause for immediate hostilities or conflict.
6. Once the invitation is accepted, the roles of the host and the guest are set by the rules of custom. The guest must not ask for anything. The host provides the best he has available, despite what may be modestly offered in the initial offer of hospitality. The guest is expected to reciprocate immediately with news, predictions of good fortune, or expressions of gratitude for what he has been given, and praise of the host's generosity and honor. The host must not ask personal questions of the guest. These matters can only be volunteered by the guest.
  7. The guest remains under the protection of the host until he/she has left the zone of obligation of the host.

This episode provides the background for the NT command, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2).

Hospitality and generosity are often under-appreciated in Christian circles. Yet the Bible pictures the kingdom of heaven as a generous, even extravagant, banquet (Isaiah 25:6-9, Matthew 22:2-4). Hospitality fosters good relationships. Abraham and Sarah's s hospitality provide an early biblical insight to the way relationships and sharing a meal go hand in hand. These strangers reaped a deeper understanding of each other by sharing a meal and an extended encounter. This remains true today. When people break bread together, or enjoy recreation or entertainment, they often grow to understand and appreciate each other better. Better working relationships and more effective communication are often fruits of hospitality.

In Abraham and Sarah's time, hospitality was almost always offered in the host's home. Today this is not always possible, or even desirable, and the hospitality industry has come into being to facilitate and offer hospitality in a wide variety of ways. If you want to offer hospitality and your home is too small or your cooking skills too limited, you might take someone to a restaurant or hotel and enjoy camaraderie and deepening relationships there. Hospitality workers would assist you in offering hospitality. Moreover, hospitality workers have in their own right the opportunity to refresh people, create good relationships, provide shelter, and serve others much as Jesus did when he made wine (John 2:1-11) and washed feet (John 13:3-11). The hospitality industry accounts for 9% of world gross domestic product and employs 98 million people,<sup>[13]</sup> including many of the less-skilled and immigrant workers who represent a rapidly growing portion of the Christian church. Even more engage in un-paid hospitality, offering hospitality to others as an act of love, friendship, compassion and social engagement. The example of Abraham and Sarah, shows that this work can be profoundly important as a service to God and humanity. How could we do more to encourage each other to be generous in hospitality, no matter what our professions are?

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## Abraham's dispute with Abimelech (Genesis 20:1-16; 21:22-34)

When Abraham and Sarah entered the country of King Abimelech, Abimelech inadvertently violated the rules of hospitality, and as restitution awarded Abraham free grazing rights to whatever land he wanted (Genesis 20:1-16). Subsequently, a dispute erupted over a certain well of water that Abraham had originally dug but Abimelech's servants later seized (Gen. 21:25). Seemingly unaware of the situation, when Abimelech heard of the complaint he entered into a sworn agreement initiated by Abraham, a treaty that publicly acknowledged Abraham's right to the well and therefore his continued business activity in the region (Gen. 21:27-31).

Elsewhere we have seen Abraham give up what was rightfully his to keep (Gen. 14:22-24). Yet here, Abraham doggedly protects what is his. The narrator does not imply that Abraham is again wavering in faith, for the account concludes with worship (Gen. 21:33). Rather, he is a model of a wise and hard-working person who conducts his business openly and makes fair use of appropriate legal protections. In the business of shepherding, access to water was essential. Abraham could not have continued to provide for his animals, workers, and family without it. The fact of Abraham's protection of water rights is therefore important as well as the means by which he secured those rights.

Like Abraham, people in every kind of work have to discern when to act generously to benefit others and when to protect resources and rights for the benefit of themselves or their organizations. There is no set of rules and regulations that can lead us to a mechanical answer. In all situations, we are stewards of God's resources, but it may not always be clear whether God's purposes are better served by giving away resources or by protecting them. But Abraham's example highlights an aspect that is easy to forget. The decision is not only a matter of who is in the right, but also of how the decision will affect our relationships with those around us. In the earlier case of dividing the land with Lot, Abraham's willing surrender of first choice to Lot laid the ground work for a good long-term working relationship. In the present case of his demanding access to the well according to his treaty rights, Abraham ensured the resources needed to keep his enterprise functioning. In addition, it seems that Abraham's forcefulness actually improved relationships between himself and Abimelech. Remember that the dispute between them arose because Abraham *didn't* assert his position when first encountering Abimelech (Gen. 20:2).

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## A burial plot for Sarah (Genesis 23:1-20)

When Sarah died, Abraham engaged in an exemplary negotiation to buy a burial plot for her. He conducted the negotiations openly and honestly in the presence of witnesses, taking due care for the needs of both himself and the seller (Gen. 23:10, 11, 12, 13, 16, 18). The property in question is clearly identified (Gen. 23:9) and Abraham's intended use as a burial site is mentioned several times (Gen. 23:4, 6, 9, 11, 13, 15, 20). The dialogue of the negotiation is exceptionally clear, socially proper, and transparent. It takes place at the gate of the city where business was done in public. Abraham initiates

the request for a real-estate transaction. The local Hittites freely offer a choice tomb. Abraham demurs, asking them to contact a certain owner of a field with a cave appropriate for a burial site so that he could buy it for the “full price.” Ephron, the owner, overheard the request and offered the field as a gift. Because this would not have resulted in Abraham having permanent claim, he politely offered to pay market value for it. Contrary to the staged bargaining that was typical of business transactions (Proverbs 20:14), Abraham immediately agreed to Ephron’s price and paid it “according to the weights current among the merchants” (Genesis 23:16). This expression meant that the deal conformed to the standard for silver used in real-estate sales. [14] Abraham could have been so wealthy that he did not need to bargain, and/or he could have been wishing to buy a measure of good will along with the land. Additionally, he could have wished to forestall any questioning of the sale and of his right to the land. In the end, he received title deed to the property with its cave and trees (Gen. 23:20). It was the important burial site of Sarah and later Abraham himself, as well as that of Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Leah.

In this matter Abraham’s actions modeled core values of integrity, transparency, and business acumen. He honored his wife by mourning and properly caring for her remains. He understood his status in the land and treated its long term residents with respect. He transacted business openly and honestly, doing so in front of witnesses. He communicated clearly. He was sensitive to the negotiating process and politely avoided accepting the land as a gift. He swiftly paid the agreed amount. He used the site only for the purpose he stated during the negotiations. He thus maintained good relationships with everyone involved.

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## Isaac (Genesis 21:1-35:29)

Isaac was the son of a great father and the father of a great son, but he himself left a mixed record. In contrast to the sustained prominence that Genesis gives to Abraham, the life of Isaac is split apart and told as attachments to the stories of Abraham and Jacob. The characterization of Isaac’s life falls into two parts: one decidedly positive and one negative. Lessons regarding work may be derived from each.

On the positive side, Isaac’s life was a gift from God. Abraham and Sarah treasured him and passed on their faith and values. God reiterated Abrahamic promises to him. Isaac’s faith and obedience when Abraham bound him as a sacrifice is exemplary, for he must have truly believed what his father had told him: “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son” (Gen. 22:8). Throughout most of his life, Isaac followed in Abraham’s footsteps. Expressing the same faith, Isaac prayed for his childless wife (Gen. 25:21). Just as Abraham gave an honorable burial to Sarah, together Isaac and Ishmael buried their father (Gen. 25:9). Isaac became such a successful farmer and shepherd that the local population envied him and asked him to move away (Gen. 26:12-16). He reopened the wells that had been dug during the time of his father, which again became subjects of disputes with the people of

Gerar concerning water rights (Gen. 26:17-21). Like Abraham, Isaac entered into a sworn agreement with Abimelech about treating one another fairly (Gen. 26:26-31). The writer of Hebrews noted that by faith Isaac lived in tents and blessed both Jacob and Esau (Gen. 11:8-10, 20). In short, Isaac had inherited a large family business and considerable wealth. Like his father, he did not hoard it, but fulfilled the role that God had chosen for him to pass on the blessing that would extend to all nations.

In these positive events, Isaac was a responsible son who learned how to lead the family and to manage its business in a way that honored the example of his capable and godly father. Abraham's diligence in preparing a successor and instituting long-lasting values brought blessing to his enterprise once again. When Isaac was 100 years old, it became his turn to designate his successor by passing on the family blessing. Although he would live another 80 years, this bestowal of the blessing was the last meaningful thing about Isaac recorded in the book of Genesis. Regrettably, he failed in this task. Rather than cooperate with God's plans, Isaac actively opposed God's word to his wife regarding their twin sons that contrary to normal custom, the elder, Esau, would serve the younger, Jacob (Gen. 25:23).

Maintaining the family business meant that the fundamental structure of the family had to be intact. It was the father's job to secure this. Foreign to most of us today, two related customs were prominent in Isaac's family, the birthright (Gen. 25:31) and the blessing (Gen. 27:4). The birthright conferred the right to inherit a larger share of the father's estate both in terms of goods and land. Though sometimes the birthright was transferred, it was typically reserved for the first-born son. The specific laws concerning it varied, but it seems to have been a stable feature of ancient near eastern culture. The birthright was associated with the father's blessing, which had to do with prosperity from God and dominion over the family. Esau wrongly believed that he could surrender the birthright yet still get the blessing (Hebrews 12:16-17). Jacob recognized that they were inseparable. With both in his possession, Jacob would assume the right to carry on the heritage of the family economically, socially, and in terms of its faith as well. Central to the unfolding plot of Genesis, the blessing entailed not only receiving the covenantal promises that God had made to Abraham but also mediating them to the next generation.

Isaac's opposition to Jacob receiving the birthright and the blessing arose from putting his personal comfort above the needs of the family organization. He preferred Esau because he loved the wild game that Esau the hunter got for him. Even though Isaac knew that Esau did not value the birthright as much as a single meal — meaning that he was neither fit for nor interested in the position of leading the enterprise — Isaac wanted Esau to have it. The private circumstances under which Isaac gave the blessing suggests that he knew such an act would invite criticism. The only positive aspect of this episode is that Isaac's faith led him to recognize that the divine blessing he had mistakenly given to Jacob was irrevocable. Generously, this is what the writer of Hebrews remembered him for. "By faith Isaac invoked blessings for the future on Jacob and Esau" (Genesis 11:20). God had chosen Isaac to perpetuate this blessing and tenaciously worked his will through him, despite Isaac's intended malfeasance.

Isaac's example reminds us that immersing ourselves in our private perspective too deeply can lead us into serious errors of judgment. Each of us is tempted by personal comforts, prejudices, and private interests to lose sight of the wider importance of our work. Our weakness may be for accolades, financial security, conflict avoidance, inappropriate relationships, short-term rewards or other personal benefits that may be at odds with doing our work to fulfill God's purposes. There are both individual and systemic factors involved. On the individual level, Isaac's bias towards Esau is repeated today when those in power choose to promote people based on bias, whether recognized or not. On the systemic level, there are still many organizations that enable leaders to hire, fire and promote people at their own whim, rather than developing successors and subordinates in a long-term, coordinated, accountable process. Whether the abuses are individual or systemic, merely resolving to do better or to change organizational processes is not an effective solution. Instead, both individuals and organizations need to be transformed by God's grace to put the truly important ahead of the personally beneficial.

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### Jacob (Genesis 25:19-49:33)

The names Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob appear often as a group because they all received covenantal promises from God and shared the same faith. But Jacob was far different than his grandfather, Abraham. Ever wily, Jacob lived much of his life according to his brute strength and ingenious wit. No stranger to conflict, Jacob was driven by a passion to get what he wanted for himself. This struggle was hard work indeed and eventually led him to the signature point of his existence, a wrestling match with a mysterious man in whom Jacob saw God face to face (Gen. 32:24, 30). Out of his weakness, Jacob called out in faith for God's blessing and was transformed by grace.

Jacob's occupational life as a shepherd is of interest to the theology of work. It takes on added significance, however, when set in the larger context of his life that moves in broad strokes from alienation to reconciliation. We have seen with Abraham that the work he did was an inseparable part of his sense of purpose stemming from his relationship with God. The same is true of Jacob, and the lesson holds for us as well.

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### Jacob's unethical procurement of Esau's birthright and blessing (Genesis 25:19-34; 26:34-28:9)

Although it was God's plan for Jacob to succeed Isaac (Gen. 25:23), Rebekah and Jacob's use of deception and theft to obtain it put the family in serious jeopardy. Their unethical treatment of husband and brother in order to secure their future at the expense of trusting God resulted in a deep and long-lived alienation in the family enterprise.

God's covenantal blessings were gifts to be received, not grasped. They carried the responsibility that

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they be used for others, not hoarded. This was lost on Jacob. Though Jacob had faith (unlike his brother, Esau), he depended on his own abilities to secure the rights he valued. Jacob exploited hungry Esau into selling him the birthright (Gen. 25:29-34). It is good that Jacob valued the birthright, but deeply faithless for him to secure it for himself, especially in the manner he did. Following the advice of his mother Rebekah (who also pursued right ends by wrong means), Jacob deceived his father. His life as a fugitive from the family testifies to the odious nature of his behavior.

Jacob began a long period of genuine belief in God's covenantal promises, yet failure to live in confidence of what God will do for him. Mature, godly people who have learned to let their faith transform their choices (and not the other way around) are in a position to serve out of their strength. Courageous and astute decisions that result in success may be rightly praised for their sheer effectiveness. But when profit comes at the expense of exploiting and deceiving others, something is wrong. Beyond the fact that unethical methods are wrong in themselves, they also may reveal fundamental fears of those who employ them. Jacob's relentless drive to gain benefits for himself reveals how his fears made him resistant to God's transforming grace. To the extent we come to believe in God's promises, we will be less inclined toward manipulating circumstances to benefit ourselves; we always need to be aware of how readily we can fool even ourselves about the purity of our motives.

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### Jacob Gains His Fortune (Genesis 30-31)

In escaping from Esau, Jacob ended up at the family farm of Laban, his mother's brother. Jacob worked for Laban for 21 frustrating years, during which Laban broke a string of promises to him. Despite this, Jacob succeeded in marrying two of Laban's daughters and starting a family. Jacob wanted to return home, but Laban convinced him to stay on and work for him with the promise that he could "name his own wages" (Gen. 30:28). Clearly Jacob had been a good worker, and Laban had been blessed through his association with Jacob.

During this time Jacob had learned the trade of breeding animals, and he used this skill to get back at Laban. Through his breeding techniques, he was able to gain a great deal of wealth at Laban's expense. It got to the point that Laban's sons were complaining that "Jacob has taken everything our father owned and gained all this wealth from what belonged to our father" (Gen. 31:1-2). Jacob noticed that Laban's attitude toward him was not what it had been. Yet Jacob claimed the gain as a gift from God, saying "If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been with me, you would surely have sent me away empty-handed" (Gen. 31:42).

Jacob felt that he had been dealt with poorly by Laban. His response, through his schemes, was to make yet another enemy, similar to the way he exploited Esau. This is a repeated pattern in Jacob's life. It seems that anything was fair game, and although he ostensibly gave God the credit, it is clear that he

did these things as a schemer. We don't see much integration of his faith with his work at this point, and it is interesting that when Hebrews recognizes Jacob as a man of faith, it mentions only his actions at the end of his life (Hebrews 11:21).

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## Jacob's transformation and reconciliation with Esau (Genesis 32-33)

After increasing tension with his father-in-law and a business separation in which both men acted less than admirably, Jacob left Laban. Having obtained his position by a dirty trick years ago, he now saw an opportunity to legitimize his position by coming to an agreement with his estranged brother, Esau. But he expected the negotiations to be tense. Wracked with fear that Esau would come to the meeting with his 400 armed men, Jacob split his family and animals into two groups to help ensure some measure of survival. He prayed for protection and sent an enormous gift of animals on ahead of him to pacify Esau before the encounter. But the night before he arrived at the meeting point, the trickster Jacob was visited by a shadowy figure out to play a trick on *him*. God himself attacked him in the form of a strongman, against whom Jacob was forced to wrestle all night. God, it turns out, is not only the God of worship and religion, but the God of work and family enterprises, and he is not above turning the tables on a slippery operator like Jacob. He pressed his advantage to the point of permanently injuring Jacob's hip, yet Jacob in his weakness said that he would not give up until his attacker had blessed him.

This became the turning-point of Jacob's life. He had known years of struggling with people, yet all along, Jacob had also been struggling in his relationship with God. Here at last, he met God and received his blessing amidst the struggle. Jacob received a new name, Israel, and even renamed the location to honor the fact that there, he had seen God face to face (Genesis 32:30). The once-ominous meeting with Esau that immediately followed in the morning contradicted Jacob's fearful expectation in the most delightful way imaginable. Esau ran to Jacob and embraced him. Esau graciously tried to refuse the gift, though Jacob insisted he take it. A transformed Jacob said to Esau, "Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God" (Gen. 33:10).

The ambiguous identity of Jacob's wrestling opponent is a deliberate feature of the story. It highlights the inseparable elements of Jacob's struggling with both God and man.<sup>[15]</sup> Jacob models for us a truth that lies at the core of our faith: our relationships with God and people are linked. Our reconciliation with God makes possible our reconciliation with others. Likewise, in that human reconciliation, we come to see and know God better. The work of reconciliation applies to families, friends, churches, companies, even people groups and nations. Christ alone can be our peace, but we are his ambassadors for it. Springing from God's initial promise to Abraham, this is a blessing that ought to touch the whole world.

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## Joseph (Genesis 37:2-50:26)

Recall that God accompanied his call to Abraham with core promises (Gen. 12:2-3). First, God would multiply his descendants into a great nation. Second, God would bless him. Third, God would make Abraham's name great, meaning that Abraham would be worthy of his renown. Fourth, Abraham would be a blessing. This last item pertains to the future generations of Abraham's family and beyond them, to all the families of the earth. God would bless those who blessed Abraham and curse those who cursed him. The book of Genesis traces the partial fulfillment of these promises through the chosen lines of Abraham's descendants, Isaac, Jacob and Jacob's sons. Among them all, it is in Joseph that God most directly fulfills his promise to bless the nations through the people of Abraham. Indeed, people from "all the world" were sustained by the food system that Joseph managed (Gen. 41:57). Joseph understood this mission and articulated the purpose of his life in line with God's intention: "the saving of many lives" (Gen. 50:20, NIV).

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## Joseph rejected and sold into slavery by his brothers (Genesis 37:2-36)

From a young age, Joseph believed God had destined him for greatness. In dreams, God assured Joseph that he would rise to a position of leadership over his parents and brothers (Gen. 37:5-11). From Joseph's point of view, these dreams were evidence of divine blessing, rather than his own ambition. From his brothers' point of view, however, the dreams were further manifestations of the unfair privilege that Joseph enjoyed as the favorite son of their father, Jacob (Gen. 37:3-4). Being sure that we are in the right does not absolve us from empathizing with others who may not share that same view. Good leaders strive to foster cooperation rather than envy. Joseph's failure to recognize this put him at severe odds with his brothers. After initially plotting murder against him, his brothers settled for selling him to a caravan of traders bearing goods through Canaan to Egypt. The merchants, in turn, sold Joseph to Potiphar, "the captain of the guard" who was "an officer of Pharaoh" in Egypt (Gen. 37:36; 39:1).

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## The schemes of Potiphar's wife and Joseph's imprisonment (Genesis 39:1-20)

Joseph's stint in Potiphar's employ gave him a wide range of fiduciary responsibilities. At first, Joseph was merely "in" his master's house. We don't know in what capacity he served, but when Potiphar recognized Joseph's general competence, he promoted him to be his personal steward and "put him in charge of all that he had" (Gen. 39:4).

After a time, Potiphar's wife took a sexual interest in Joseph (Gen. 39:7). Joseph's refusal of the wife's advances was articulate and reasonable. He reminded her of the broad trust that Potiphar had placed

in him and described the relationship she sought in the moral/religious terms “wicked” and “sinful” (Gen. 39:9). He was sensitive to both the social and theological dimensions. Furthermore, he offered his verbal resistance repeatedly, and he even avoided being in her presence. When physically assaulted, Joseph made the choice to flee half-naked rather than to submit.

The sexual harassment by this woman took place in a power relationship that disadvantaged Joseph. Although she believed that she had the right and power to use Joseph in this way, her words and contact were clearly unwelcome to him. Joseph’s work required him to be at home where she was, yet he could not call the matter to Potiphar’s attention without interfering in their marital relationship. Even after his escape and arrest on false charges, Joseph seems to have had no legal recourse.

The facets of this episode touch closely on the issues of sexual harassment in the workplace today. People have different standards of what counts for inappropriate speech and physical contact, but the whims of those in power are what often count in practice. Workers are often expected to report incidences of potential harassment to their superiors, but often are reluctant to do so because they know the risk of obfuscation and retaliation. To compound this, even when harassment can be documented, workers may suffer for having come forward. Joseph’s godliness did not rescue him from false accusation and imprisonment. If we find ourselves in a parallel situation, our godliness is no guarantee that we will escape unscathed. But Joseph did leave an instructive testimony to Potiphar’s wife and possibly others in the household. Knowing that we belong to the Lord and that he defends the weak will certainly help us to face difficult situations without giving up. This story is a realistic recognition that standing up to sexual harassment in the workplace may have devastating consequences. Yet it is also a story of hope that by God’s grace, good may eventually prevail in the situation. Joseph also provides a model for us, that even when we are falsely accused and wrongly treated, that we carry on with the work God has given us allowing God to make it right in the end.

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## Joseph’s interpretation of dreams in prison (Genesis 39:20-40:23)

Joseph’s service in prison was marked by the Lord’s presence, the jailer’s favor, and Joseph’s promotion to leadership (Gen. 39:20b-23). In prison, Joseph met two of Pharaoh’s officials who were incarcerated, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker. Many Egyptian texts mention the role of cupbearers, who not only tasted wine for quality and to detect poison but also who enjoyed proximity to those with political power. They often became confidants who were valued for their counsel (see Nehemiah 2:1-4).<sup>[16]</sup>

Like chief cupbearers, chief bakers were also trusted officials who had open access to the highest persons in the government and who may have performed duties that extended beyond the preparation of food.<sup>[17]</sup> In prison, Joseph did the work of interpreting dreams for these politically connected individuals.

Interpreting dreams in the ancient world was a sophisticated profession involving technical “dream books” that listed elements of dreams and their meanings. Records of the veracity of past dreams and their interpretations provided empirical evidence to support the interpreter’s predictions. [18] Joseph, however, was not schooled in this tradition and credited God with providing the interpretations that eventually proved true (Genesis 40:8). In this case, the cupbearer was restored to his former post, where he promptly forgot about Joseph.

The dynamics present in this story are still present today. We may invest in the success of another who rises beyond our reach, only to be discarded when our usefulness has been spent. Does this mean that our work has been for nothing and that we would have been better off to focus on our own position and promotion? What’s more, Joseph had no way of independently verifying the stories of the two officials in prison. “The one who first states a case seems right, until the other comes and cross-examines” (Proverbs 18:17). After sentencing, however, any prisoner can assert his or her own innocence.

We may have doubts about how our investment in others may eventually benefit us or our organizations. We may wonder about the character and motives of the people we help. We may disapprove of what they do afterward and how that might reflect on us. These matters can be varied and complex. They call for prayer and discernment, but must they paralyze us? The Apostle Paul wrote, “Whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all” (Galatians 6:10). If we start with a commitment to work for God above all others, then it is easier to move ahead, believing that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28, NIV).

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## Joseph’s promotion by Pharaoh (Genesis 41:1-45)

Two more years passed until Joseph gained an opportunity for release from his misery in prison. Pharaoh had begun to have disturbing dreams, and the chief cupbearer remembered the skill of the young Hebrew in prison. Pharaoh’s dreams about cows and stalks of grain befuddled his most-skilled counselors. Joseph testified to God’s ability to provide interpretations and his own role as merely the mediator of this revelation (Genesis 41:16). Before Pharaoh, Joseph did not use the covenant name of God exclusive to his own people. Instead, he consistently referred to God with the more general term, *’elōhîm*. In so doing, Joseph avoided making any unnecessary offense, a point supported by the fact that Pharaoh credited God with revealing to Joseph the meaning of Pharaoh’s dreams (Gen. 41:39). In the workplace, sometimes believers can give God credit for their success in a shallow manner that ends up putting people off. Joseph’s way of doing it impressed the Pharaoh, showing that publicly giving God credit can be done in a believable way. See (CONTENT NOT YET AVAILABLE) *\*Evangelism at Work* at [www.theologyofwork.org](http://www.theologyofwork.org) for more about how work can be a witness of God’s grace.

God's presence with Joseph was so obvious that Pharaoh promoted Joseph to second-in-command of Egypt, especially to take charge of preparations for the coming famine (Gen. 41:37-45). God's word to Abraham was bearing fruit: "I will bless those who bless you...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). Like Joseph, when we confess our own inability to meet the challenges we face and find appropriate ways to attribute success to God, we forge a powerful defense against the pride that often accompanies public acclaim.

Joseph's promotion brought him significant accoutrements of leadership: a royal signet ring and gold chain, fine clothing appropriate to his high office, official transportation, a new Egyptian name, and an Egyptian wife from an upper class family (Gen. 41:41-45). If ever there was a lure to leave his Hebrew heritage behind, this was it. God helps us deal with failure and defeat, yet we may need his help even more when dealing with success. The text presents several indications of how Joseph handled his promotion in a godly way. Part of this had to do with Joseph's preparation before his promotion.

Back in his father's home, the dreams of leadership that God gave him convinced Joseph that he had a divinely ordained purpose and destiny that he never forgot. His personal nature was basically trusting of people. He seems to have held no grudge against his jealous brothers or the forgetful cupbearer. Before Pharaoh promoted him, Joseph knew that the Lord was with him and he had tangible evidence to prove it. Repeatedly giving God credit was not only the right thing to do, it reminded Joseph himself that his skills were from the Lord. Joseph was courteous and humble, showing a desire to do whatever he could to help Pharaoh and the Egyptian people. Even when the Egyptians were bereft of currency and livestock, Joseph earned the trust of the Egyptian people and of Pharaoh himself (Gen. 41:55). Throughout the rest of his life as an administrator, Joseph consistently devoted himself to effective management for the good of others.

Joseph's story to this point reminds us that in our broken world, God's response to our prayers doesn't necessarily come quickly. Joseph was seventeen years old when his brothers sold him into slavery (Gen. 37:2). His final release from captivity came when he was thirty (Gen. 41:46), thirteen long years later.

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## Joseph's successful management of the food crisis (Genesis 41:46-57; 47:13-26)

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### Joseph creates a long-term agricultural policy and infrastructure (Genesis 41:46-57)

Joseph immediately went about the work to which Pharaoh had appointed him. His primary interest was in getting the job done for others rather than taking personal advantage of his new position at the head of the royal court. He maintained his faith in God, giving his children names that credited God with healing his emotional pain and making him fruitful (Gen. 41:51-52). He recognized that his

wisdom and discernment were gifts from God, but nevertheless that he still had much to learn about the land of Egypt, its agricultural industry in particular. As the senior administrator, Joseph's work touched on nearly every practical area of the nation's life. His office would have required that he learn much about legislation, communication, negotiation, transportation, safe and efficient methods of food storage, building, economic strategizing and forecasting, record-keeping, payroll, the handling of transactions both by means of currency and through bartering, human resources, and the acquisition of real-estate. His extraordinary abilities with respect to God and people did not operate in separate domains. The genius of Joseph's success lay in the effective integration of his divine gifts and acquired competencies. For Joseph, all of this was godly work.

Pharaoh had already characterized Joseph as "discerning and wise" (Gen. 41:39), and these characteristics enabled Joseph to do the work of strategic planning and administration.<sup>[19]</sup> The Hebrew words for "wise" and "wisdom" (*hāḵām* and *hokmāh*) denote a high level of mental perceptivity but also are used of a wide range of practical skills including craftsmanship of wood, precious stones, and metal (Exodus 31:3-5; 35:31-33), tailoring (Exodus 28:3; 35:26, 35), as well as administration (Deuteronomy 34:9; 2 Chronicles 1:10) and legal justice (1 Kings 3:28). These skills are found among unbelievers as well, but the wise in the Bible enjoy the special blessing of God who intends Israel to display God's ways to the nations (Deuteronomy 4:6).

As his first act "Joseph went through all the land of Egypt" (Genesis 41:46) on an inspection tour. He would have to become familiar with the people who managed agriculture, the locations and conditions of the fields, the crops, the roads, and means of transportation. It is inconceivable that Joseph could have accomplished all of this on a personal level. He would have had to establish and oversee the training of what amounted to a Department of Agriculture and Revenue. During the seven years of abundant harvest, Joseph had the grain stored in cities (Gen. 41:48-49). During the seven lean years that followed, Joseph dispensed grain to the Egyptians and other people who were affected by the wide-spread famine. To create and administer all this, while surviving the political intrigue of an absolute monarchy, required exceptional talent.

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## Joseph relieves the poverty of Egypt's people (Genesis 47:13-26)

After the people ran out of money, Joseph allowed them to barter their livestock for food. This plan lasted for one year during which Joseph collected horses, sheep, goats, cattle, and donkeys (Gen. 47:15-17). He would have had to determine the value of these animals and establish an equitable system for exchange. When food is scarce, people are especially concerned for the survival of themselves and their loved ones. Providing access to points of food-distribution and treating people evenhandedly become acutely important administrative matters.

When all of the livestock had been traded, people willingly sold themselves into slavery to Pharaoh and sold him the ownership of their lands as well (Gen. 47:18-21). From the perspective of leadership, this must have been awful to witness. Joseph, however, allowed the people to sell their land and to enter into servitude but he did not take advantage of them in their powerlessness. Joseph would have had to see that these properties were valued correctly in exchange for seed for planting (Gen. 47:23). He enacted an enduring law that people return 20% of the harvest to Pharaoh. This entailed creating a system to monitor and enforce the people's compliance with the law and establishing a department dedicated to managing the revenue. In all of this, Joseph exempted the priestly families from selling their land because Pharaoh supplied them with a fixed allotment of food to meet their needs adequately (Gen. 47:22, 26). Handling this special population would have entailed having a smaller, distinct system of distribution that was tailored for them.

Poverty and its consequences are economic realities. Our first duty is to help eliminate them, but we cannot expect complete success until God's kingdom is fulfilled. Believers may not have the power to eliminate the circumstances that require people to make hard choices but we can find ways to support people as they—or perhaps we, ourselves—cope. Choosing the lesser of two evils may be necessary work, but can be emotionally devastating. In our work, we may experience tension arising from feeling empathy for the needy yet bearing responsibility to do what is good for the people and organizations we work for. Joseph experienced God's guidance in these difficult tasks, and we also have received God's promise that "I will never leave you or forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5).

Happily, by applying his God-given skill and wisdom, Joseph successfully brought Egypt through the agricultural catastrophe. When the seven years of good harvests came, Joseph developed a stockpiling system to store the grain for use during the coming drought. When the seven years of drought arrived, "Joseph opened the storehouses," and provided enough food to bring the nation through the famine. His wise strategy and effective implementation of the plan even allowed Egypt to supply grain to the rest of the world during the famine (Genesis 41:57). In this case, God's fulfillment of his promise that Abraham's descendants would be a blessing to the world occurred not only for the benefit of foreign nations, but even through the industry of a foreign nation, Egypt.

In fact, God's blessing for the people of Israel came only after and through his blessing of foreigners. God did not raise up an Israelite in the land of Israel to provide for Israel's relief during the famine. Instead God enabled Joseph, working in and through the Egyptian government, to provide for the needs of the people of Israel (Gen. 47:11-12). Nonetheless, we shouldn't idealize Joseph. As an official in a sometimes repressive society, he became part of its power structure, and he personally imposed slavery on uncounted numbers of people (Gen. 47:21).

## Applications from Joseph's management experience (Genesis 41:46-57; 47:13-26)

Genesis's interest in Joseph's management of the food crisis lies more in its effect on the family of Israel than in developing principles for effective management. Nonetheless, to the degree that Joseph's extraordinary leadership can serve as an example for leaders today, we can derive some practical applications from his work:

1. Become as familiar as possible with the state of affairs as they exist at the beginning of your service.
2. Pray for discernment regarding the future so that you can make wise plans.
3. Commit yourself to God first and then expect him to direct and establish your plans.
4. Gratefully and appropriately acknowledge the gifts God has given you.
5. Even though others recognize God's presence in your life and the special talents you have, do not broadcast these in a self-serving effort to gain respect.
6. Educate yourself about how to do your job and carry it out with excellence.
7. Seek the practical good for others, knowing that God has placed you where you are to be a blessing.
8. Be fair in all of your dealings, especially when the circumstances are grim and deeply problematic.
9. Although your exemplary service may propel you to prominence, remember your founding mission as God's servant. Your life does not consist in what you gain for yourself.
10. Value the godliness of the myriad types of honorable work that society needs.
11. Generously extend the fruit of your labor as widely as possible to those who truly need it, regardless of what you think of them as individuals.
12. Accept the fact that God may bring you into a particular field of work under extremely challenging conditions. This does not mean that something has gone terribly wrong or that you are out of God's will.
13. Have courage that God will fit you for the task.
14. Accept the fact that sometimes people must choose what they regard as the better of two very unpleasant yet unavoidable situations.
15. Believe that what you do will not only benefit those whom you see and meet, but also that your work has the potential to touch lives for many generations to come. God is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20).

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## Joseph's dealings with his brothers (Genesis 42-43)

In the midst of the crisis in Egypt, Joseph's brothers arrived from Canaan, seeking to buy food, as the famine severely affected their land also. They did not recognize Joseph, and he did not reveal himself to them. He dealt with his brothers largely through the language of commerce. The word "silver" (*keseph*) appears twenty times in chapters 42-45 and the word for "grain" (*šēber*) nineteen. Trading in this commodity provided the framework on which the intricate personal dynamics hung.

Joseph's behavior in this situation became quite shrewd. First, he concealed his identity from his



brothers, which, while not necessarily rising to the level of open deceit (Hebrew *mirmāh* as with Jacob in Gen. 27:35), certainly was less than forthright. Second, he spoke harshly to his brothers with accusations he knew were unfounded (Gen. 42:7, 9, 14, 16; 44:3-5). In short, Joseph took advantage of his power to deal with a group he knew could be untrustworthy because of their earlier treatment of him. [20] His motive was to discern the present character of the people he was dealing with. He had suffered greatly at their hands over twenty years prior, and had every reason to distrust their words, actions, and commitment to the family.

Joseph's methods verged on deception. He withheld critical information and manipulated events in various ways. Joseph's acted in the role of a detective conducting a tough interrogation. He could not proceed with full transparency and expect to get reliable information from them. The biblical concept for this tactic is shrewdness. Shrewdness may be exercised for good or for ill. On the one hand the serpent was "the shrewdest of all the wild animals" (Gen. 3:1, NLT[21]), and employed shrewd methods for disastrously evil purposes. But the Hebrew word for shrewdness (*'ormāh* and cognates) is also translated as "good judgment" (Gen. 8:5), "prudence" (Gen. 8:12), and "clever" (Proverbs 12:23; 13:16; 14:8; 22:3; and 27:12), indicating that it may be used to make possible godly work in hostile contexts. Jesus himself counseled his disciples to be "as shrewd as snakes and harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16, NLT). The Bible often commends shrewdness in the pursuit of noble purposes (Proverbs 1:4; 8:5, 12).

Joseph's shrewdness had the intended effect of testing his brothers' integrity. They returned the silver Joseph had secretly packed in the baggage (Genesis 43:20-21). When he tested them further by treating the youngest, Benjamin, more generously than the others, they proved they had learned not to fall into animosity among themselves the way they had done when they sold Joseph himself into slavery.

It would be superficial to read into Joseph's actions the claim that thinking you are on God's side is always a justification for deceit. But Joseph's long career of service and suffering in God's service gave him a deeper understanding of the situation than his brothers had. Seemingly, the promise that God would make them into a large nation hung in the balance. Joseph knew that it was not in his human power to save them, but took advantage of his God-given authority and wisdom to serve and help. Two important factors differentiate Joseph in making the decision to use means that otherwise would not be commendable. First, he gained nothing from these machinations for himself. He had received a blessing from God and his actions were solely in the service of *becoming* a blessing to others. He could have exploited his brothers' desperate predicament and spitefully exacted a greater sum of silver, knowing they would have given anything to survive. Instead, he used knowledge to save them. Second, his actions were necessary if he was to be able to offer the blessings. If he had dealt with his brothers more openly, he could not have tested their trustworthiness in the matter.

## Judah's transformation to a man of God (Genesis 44:1-45:15)

In the final episode of Joseph's testing of his brothers, Joseph framed Benjamin for an imaginary crime, and claimed Benjamin as a slave in recompense. He demanded the brothers return home to Isaac without Benjamin (Gen. 44:17). Judah emerged as the group's spokesman. What gave him the standing to take on this role? He had broken faith with his family by marrying a Canaanite (Gen. 38:2), had raised such wicked sons that the Lord put two of them to death (Gen. 38:7, 10), had treated his daughter-in-law as a prostitute (Gen. 38:18), and had hatched the plan to sell his own brother as a slave (Gen. 37:27). But the story Judah told Joseph showed a changed man. He exhibited unexpected compassion in telling of the family's heart-wrenching experience of starvation, of his father's undying love for Benjamin, and of Judah's own promise to his father that he would bring Benjamin back home, lest Jacob literally die from grief. Then, in an ultimate expression of compassion, Judah offered to substitute *himself* in place of Benjamin! He proposed that he be retained in Egypt for the rest of his life as the governor's slave if only the governor would let Benjamin go home to his father (Gen. 44:33-34).

Seeing the change in Judah, Joseph was able to bless them as God intended. He disclosed to them the full truth: "I am Joseph!!!" It appears that Joseph finally saw that his brothers could be trusted. In our own dealings with those who would exploit and deceive us, we must tread carefully, to be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves, as Jesus instructed the disciples (Matthew 10:16). As one writer put it, "Trust requires trustworthiness." All of the planning Joseph had done in his discussions with his brothers reached this culmination, allowing him to enter into a right relationship with them. He calmed his terrified brothers by pointing to the work of God who was responsible for placing Joseph in charge of all Egypt (Genesis 45:8). Waltke spells out the importance of the interaction between Joseph and his brothers:

This scene exposes the anatomy of reconciliation. It is about loyalty to a family member in need, even when he or she looks guilty; giving glory to God by owning up to sin and its consequences; overlooking favoritism; offering up oneself to save another; demonstrating true love by concrete acts of sacrifice that create a context of trust; discarding control and the power of knowledge in favor of intimacy; embracing deep compassion, tender feelings, sensitivity, and forgiveness; and talking to one another. A dysfunctional family that allows these virtues to embrace it will become a light to the world.[22]

God is more than able to bring his blessings to the world through deeply flawed people. But we must be willing to continually repent of the evil we do and turn to God for transformation, even if we are never perfectly purged of our errors, weaknesses and sins in this life.

Contrary to the values of the societies around Israel, the willingness of leaders to offer themselves in sacrifice for the sins of others was intended to be a signature trait of leadership among the people of God. Moses would show it when Israel sinned regarding the golden calf. He prayed, “Alas, this people has sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will only forgive their sin—but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written” (Exodus 32:31-32). David would show it when he saw the angel of the Lord striking down the people. He prayed, “What have they done? Let your hand, I pray, be against me and against my father’s house” (2 Samuel 24:17). Jesus, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, would show it when he said, “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord” (John 10:17-18).

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### Jacob’s family’s move to Egypt (Genesis 45:16-47:12)

Joseph and Pharaoh lavishly gave Joseph’s brothers “the best of all the land of Egypt” (Genesis 45:20) and supplied them for their return to Canaan and transportation of the family. This apparently happy ending has a dark side, however. God had promised Abraham and his descendants the land of *Canaan*, not Egypt. Long after Joseph passed from the scene, Egypt’s relationship with Israel turned from hospitality to hostility. Seen this way, how does Joseph’s benevolence to the family fit with his role as mediator of God’s blessing to all families of the earth (Gen. 12:3)? Joseph was a man of insight who planned for the future, and did bring about the portion of God’s blessing assigned to him. But God did not reveal to him the future rise of a “new king...who did not know Joseph” (Exodus 1:8). Each generation needs to remain faithful to God and receive God’s blessings in their own time. Regrettably, Joseph’s descendants forgot God’s promises and drifted into faithlessness. Yet God did not forget his promise to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants. Among their descendants God would raise up new men and women to impart God’s promised blessings.

**(Genesis 47:13-26 - see discussion above in the section on [Genesis 41:46-57](#))**

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### God meant all for good (Genesis 50:15-21)

The penitent words of the brothers led Joseph to one of the finest theological points of his life and indeed, of much of Genesis. He told them not to be afraid, for he would not retaliate for their mistreatment of him. “Even though you intended to do harm to me,” he told them, “God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones” (Gen. 50:20-21). Joseph’s reference to “numerous people” echoes God’s covenantal promise to bless “all families of the earth” (Gen. 12:3). From our vantage point today, we can see that God sent far more blessing than Joseph could have ever asked or imagined (see

Ephesians 3:20).

God's work in and through Joseph had real, practical, serious value—to preserve lives. If we ever have the impression that God only wants us in the workplace so we can tell others about him, or if we get the impression that the only part of our work that matters to God is building relationships, Joseph's work says otherwise. The things we make and do in our work are themselves crucially important to God and to other people. Sometimes this is true because our work is a piece of a bigger whole, and we lose sight of the result of the work. Joseph took a larger perspective on his work, and was not discouraged by its inevitable ups and downs.

This is not to say that relationships at work aren't also of the highest importance. Perhaps Christians have the special gift of offering people in our workplaces forgiveness. Joseph's reassurance to his brothers is a model of forgiveness. Following the instruction of his father, Joseph forgave his brothers and thus verbally released them from guilt. But his forgiveness—like all true forgiveness—was not just verbal. Joseph used the extensive resources of Egypt that God had placed under his control to support them materially so that they could prosper. He acknowledged that judgment was not his role. "Am I in the place of God?" (Genesis 50:19). He did not usurp God's role as judge, but helped his brothers to connect with God who had saved them.

The relationship Joseph had with his brothers was both familial and economic. There is no clearly defined boundary between these areas; forgiveness is appropriate to both. We may be tempted to think that our most cherished religious values are primarily meant to function in identifiably religious spheres, such as the local church. Of course, much of our work life does take place in the public realm and we must respect the fact that others do not share our Christian faith. But the neat division of life into separate compartments labeled "sacred" and "secular" is something foreign to the worldview of Scripture. It is not sectarian, then, to affirm that forgiveness is a sound workplace practice.

There will always be plenty of hurt and pain in life. No company or organization is immune from that. It would be naïve to assume generally that nobody deliberately means to cause harm by what they say or do. Joseph acknowledged that people *did* intend to harm him; we can do the same. But in the same sentence lives the larger truth about God's intention for good. Recalling that point when we feel hurt both helps us to bear the pain and to identify with Christ.

Joseph saw himself as an agent of God who was instrumental in effecting the work of God with his people. He knew the harm that people were capable of and accepted that sometimes people are their own worst enemies. He knew the family stories of faith mixed with doubt, of faithful service mingled with self-preservation, of both truth and deceit. He also knew of the promises God made to Abraham, of God's commitment to bless this family, and of God's wisdom in working with his people as he refined them through the fires of life. He did not paint over their sins; rather, he absorbed them into his

awareness of God’s grand work. Our awareness of the inevitable, providential successfulness of God’s promises makes our labor worthwhile, no matter the cost to us.

Of the many lessons about work in the book of Genesis, this one in particular endures and even explains redemption itself—the crucifixion of the Lord of glory (1 Corinthians 2:8-10). Our places of work provide contexts in which our values and character are brought to light as we make decisions that affect ourselves and those around us. In his wise power, God is capable of working with our faithfulness, mending our weakness, and forging our failures to accomplish what he himself has prepared for us who love him.

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## Conclusions about Genesis 12-50

Genesis chapters 12-50 tells the story of the first three generations of the family through whom God chose to bring his blessings to the whole world. Having no particular power, position, wealth, fame, ability, or moral superiority of their own, they accepted his call to trust him to provide for them and fulfill the great vision he had for them. Although God proved faithful in every way, their own faithfulness was often fitful, timid, foolish and precarious. They proved to be as dysfunctional as any family, yet they maintained, or at least kept returning to, the seed of faith he placed in them. Functioning in a broken world, surrounded by hostile people and powers, by faith they “invoked blessings for the future” (Hebrews 11:20) and lived according to God’s promises. “Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them” (Hebrews 11:16), the same city in which we also work as followers of “Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matthew 1:1).

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## Key Verses and Themes in Genesis 12-50

**Genesis 12:1-4a** Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” So Abram went, as the Lord had told him...

God’s blessing is not limited to one’s own benefit. Its purpose is to enable his people to be a blessing to others. Robust biblical faith is not a mere feeling; it is an active response to the divine word.

<p><b>Genesis 13:2</b> Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold.</p>	<p>Wealth is not necessarily proof of God’s favor or a reward for our moral behavior, but when God gives wealth we ought to consider how it may be used to bless others.</p>
<p><b>Genesis 13:8-9</b> Then Abram said to Lot, “Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herders and my herders; for we are kindred. Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left.”</p>	<p>Generosity may extend beyond giving away some of our things. Giving others an active role in decision-making displays our respect for them as well as our confidence in God’s care for us.</p>
<p><b>Genesis 14:22-23</b> Abram said to the king of Sodom, “I have sworn to the Lord, God Most High, maker of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal-thong or anything that is yours, so that you might not say, ‘I have made Abram rich.’”</p>	<p>In order to nullify a claim that others may think they have on us, believers may voluntarily relinquish what is rightfully theirs for the sake of God’s purposes.</p>
<p><b>Genesis 15:1</b> After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.” (NIV)</p>	<p>Trust in God’s covenantal commitment to us is a powerful antidote to fear and uncertainty.</p>
<p><b>Genesis 18:3-5</b> He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.”</p>	<p>Hospitality may be personally costly, but it provides a context for cultivating relationships and welcomes God’s presence.</p>

<p><b>Genesis 18:19</b> I [the Lord] have chosen him [Abraham], that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice; so that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.</p>	<p>Following God’s way demands a public faith whereby believers actively work for what is right and just both now and for future generations.</p>
<p><b>Genesis 23:16</b> Abraham agreed with Ephron; and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver that he had named in the hearing of the Hittites, four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weights current among the merchants.</p>	<p>Believers may choose to honor God by doing business in a way that is contrary to the accepted custom (in this case, staged bargaining.)</p>
<p><b>Genesis 24:12</b> He said, “O Lord, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham.”</p>	<p>Believers with fiduciary responsibilities serve those who commission them by depending on God’s power and working for God’s glory.</p>
<p><b>Genesis 32:26</b> Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”</p>	<p>In contrast to using desperate means to grasp what we want for ourselves, believers recognize that God’s blessings are gifts of grace to be received.</p>
<p><b>Genesis 33:10</b> Jacob said, “No, please; if I find favor with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—now that you have received me favorably.”</p>	<p>The work of reconciliation may be the hardest with those we are closest to, but because Christ is our peace, we can promote reconciliation around the entire world.</p>



<p><b>Genesis 37:5</b> Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more.</p>	<p>Jealousy, envy, and false accusations are formidable obstacles, but God calls his people to patient and active trust in what God said he would do.</p>
<p><b>Genesis 39:3-4</b> His master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hands. So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him; he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had.</p> <p><b>Genesis 41:39-40</b> So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has shown you all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you."</p>	<p>Knowing that God has placed believers where he wants them to be enables them to serve faithfully, regardless of the prominence and fame that may come with the job.</p>
<p><b>Genesis 39:8-9</b> But he [Joseph] refused and said to his master's wife, "Look, with me here, my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand. He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"</p>	<p>The people of God are doubly accountable, working immediately for human employers and ultimately for God himself.</p> <p>Personal godliness does not necessarily guarantee that believers will always escape unjust treatment.</p>
<p><b>Genesis 41:16</b> Joseph answered Pharaoh, "It is not I; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer."</p>	<p>Believers should give God credit for their skills yet be mindful of what attitudes are appropriate in the workplace where people do not share the same faith.</p>

<p><b>Genesis 44:32</b> Your servant became surety for the boy to my father, saying, “If I do not bring him back to you, then I will bear the blame in the sight of my father all my life.”</p>	<p>In extreme circumstances, a godly leader may need to make costly personal sacrifices in order to honor one’s promises and to protect the weak.</p>
<p><b>Genesis 50:20</b> [Joseph said to his brothers,] “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.”</p>	<p>When forgiveness becomes a way of life, it is much easier to look beyond personal offenses and appreciate what God is doing in the long term.</p>

## ENDNOTES

- [1] God’s changing of his name from “Abram” to “Abraham” (17:5) is important in the book of Genesis, but not particularly relevant to the topic of work. We will refer to him throughout by his familiar name, Abraham, and likewise, for Sarai/Sarah.
- [2] Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, First ed. (Zondervan, 2001), 182-83.
- [3] Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, First ed. (Zondervan, 2001), 216.
- [4] Victor H. Matthews, “Nomadism, Pastoralism” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck, eds. (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 972.
- [5] John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (IVP Academic, 2000), 44.
- [6] Victor H. Matthews, “Nomadism, Pastoralism” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck, eds. (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 971.
- [7] Mitchell, T. C. “Nomads.” In *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed., ed. I. Howard Marshall, A. R. Millard, J.

- I. Packer, and D. J. Wiseman, 828-30. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996, 831.
- [8] Mitchell, T. C. "Nomads." In *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed., ed. I. Howard Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, and D. J. Wiseman, 828-30. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996, 829.
- [9] Victor H. Matthews, "Nomadism, Pastoralism" in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck, eds. (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 972.
- [10] Julian Pitt-Rivers, "The Stranger, the Guest, and the Hostile Host: Introduction to the Study of the Laws of Hospitality," in *Contributions to Mediterranean Sociology*, ed. J. G. Peristiany (Paris: Mouton, 1968), 13-30.
- [11] Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, First ed. (Zondervan, 2001), 216.
- [12] Abstracted from Matthews, "Hospitality and Hostility in Judges 4," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 21/1 (1991), 13-15.
- [13] World Travel and Tourism Council, *Travel and Tourism Economic Impact 2012, World* (London: 2012), 1.
- [14] John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (IVP Academic, 2000), 55.
- [15] Kitchen, Kenneth A. "Cupbearer," In *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed., ed. I. Howard Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, and D. J. Wiseman, 248. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996, 248.
- [16] Harrison, Roland K. "Baker." In *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 1:404. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979, 404.
- [17] Walton, John H. *Genesis*. NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001, 672-73.
- [18] Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, First ed. (Zondervan, 2001), 565-66.