

EXCERPT



Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes *Patronage, Honor, and Shame in the Biblical World*

Available October 13, 2020 | \$28, 304 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5275-8

The Bible was written within collectivist cultures, and it's easy for Westerners to misinterpret—or miss—important elements. Combining the expertise of a biblical scholar and a missionary practitioner, this essential guidebook explores the deep social structures of the ancient Mediterranean, stripping away individualist assumptions and helping us read the Bible better.

Social Structures of the Biblical World

Everyone loves the story of the patriarch Joseph, with his multi-colored coat. I as an individualist often think of the story as if it were all about Joseph. Potiphar's wife and Joseph's brothers (and later his fellow slaves) are just supporting cast in the background of the play. The way we often tell the story goes from Joseph-in-Jacob's-tent to Joseph-in-Pharaoh's-palace. There are some crazy details about cups and contraband. People come and go, and after a long and protracted process Joseph's dad shows up and then dies. The later chapters, when Joseph is ruling in Egypt and his brothers show up, feel like a kind of epilogue. They are so anticlimactic to us. I was stunned to learn these are the chapters my collectivist friends love the most. Those chapters are not anticlimactic; they are not an epilogue but the grand finale. To my Mediterranean friends, this is where the story really gets exciting. They are on the edge of their seats.

This is because the entire story of Joseph is actually about Joseph's *family* and how God reconciled them. For collectivists, it is not a story about how God advanced Joseph's career. It is not an urban-migration success story. Rather, Joseph angered his brothers, who respond badly, and Joseph becomes estranged from the family. Some collectivists might say it is *Joseph's* fault. He should have known better than to anger his brothers. My Mediterranean friends who are careful readers of the Bible place the blame somewhere else. Not on the brothers, not on Joseph. To them, most of the blame lies squarely with their father, Jacob. He is the father of *all* the brothers. As the head of the (ancient) household, it would have been his job to sort out disagreements and tensions like this one. Joseph is young. Fathers are supposed to correct arrogant young sons. The brothers were angry. Jacob should have raised his sons to care for one another even when Joseph was arrogant. Did Jacob even notice the problem? He could, and should, have reconciled the tensions. Instead, he exacerbates them. He gives Joseph a special robe and allows him to stay home while the others have to work. There are a lot of problems in the family. But, never fear, God overcomes (all their) sin. The end of the story is good, because it is about how Jacob, Joseph, and all the brothers are reconciled.

My individualist culture constantly gives me signposts that point me to focus on individuals and their interests. I often miss or underplay collective groups and their collective interests. These same individualist signposts can also cause me to misread the story of Joseph. I easily assume the whole story is about him, almost turning it into a fable about how a young man left home, overcame adversity, and found success. Worse, the way I read the story had the Bible reinforcing capitalism and the American dream. When I do this, I miss a lot of what the Bible is saying. I think I know the story. Joseph is Jacob's favorite son, and Jacob gives him a gift. Right there, I have focused on two individuals. This is actually a kinship (family) story.

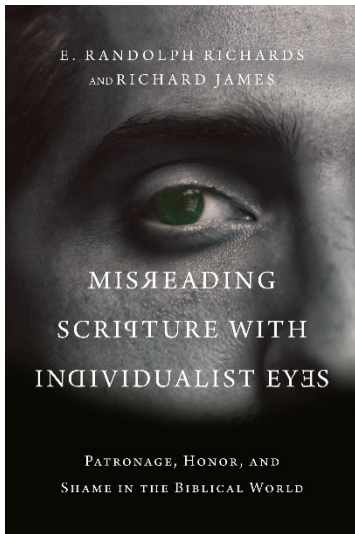
Jacob has two wives, Leah and Rachel. At this point in Genesis, we know Jacob prefers the younger wife, Rachel. The Bible



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tells us the story of Rachel first. Jacob asks (inappropriately) to marry Rachel when her older sister is still unmarried (Gen 29). This matches a pattern in Jacob's behavior of not respecting relatives, including his own brother (Gen 25:29-34). For Laban to arrange the marriage of the younger before the elder sister might doom Leah to spinsterhood. Jacob ends up married to both sisters but loves only Rachel (Gen 30:1). Things get worse. Leah, the older sister, bears sons aplenty, but Rachel "was not bearing Jacob any children" (Gen 30:1). As a modern individualist, I see this as a personal matter, perhaps a personal tragedy, because whether one has children is an individual matter. Every part of my last sentence contradicts the values of the ancient Mediterranean world. Children are not a choice. Children are not an individual, personal matter. Children determine inheritance, who owns the flocks. They are a gift and a blessing from God (to the family).

Eventually, God helps Rachel give birth to a son of her own, Joseph (Gen 30:25). As an individualist I note (with a proper frown) that Jacob plays favorites and prefers Joseph over his brothers. I fail to note, though, very important kinship factors in the story. *All* the other brothers in the story are sons of Leah. When Jacob gives the multicolored coat (or full-length robe) to Joseph, this isn't just a matter of Joseph getting a nicer Christmas gift than the other brothers. It isn't merely Jacob showing he loves Joseph more. Jacob is indicating who will be the *heir*. Reuben is the oldest son—but the oldest son of *Leah*. Joseph is the oldest son of *Rachel*. Jacob is indicating that the inheritance will run through Rachel's side of the family, the wife he loves. The Bible states it plainly, albeit in ways that go without being said. Joseph is given higher status. We note that Jacob keeps Joseph *home with him* while the other brothers are out shepherding in the *field* (Gen 37:12-14). What went without being said is that Jacob is giving Joseph more than just an easier job. Joseph is in the manager's office, while the brothers are on the factory floor. Jacob even sends Joseph out to give instructions to the *older* brothers.

Couldn't the other brothers have just gotten on with their own lives? Inheritance wasn't just a father-son relationship issue. If Joseph inherits, then the sons of the noninheriting wife are out. These sons, Joseph's half-brothers, have their own families to consider. What will happen to them and their children? In the ancient world, the noninheriting counted on the inheritor. Joseph's brothers should be able to count on their *brother*. Joseph should look after them and treat them fairly. They are, after all, family.

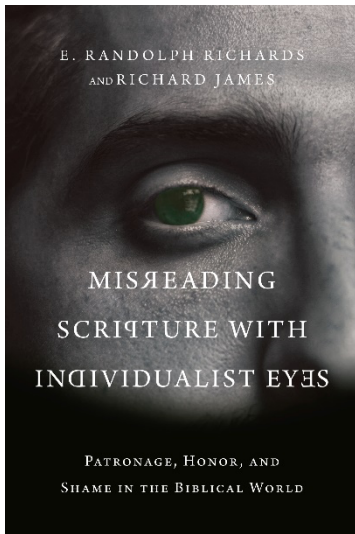
Well, one would expect a man to treat his brothers well. Yet, Joseph's attitude about inheriting has already been made clear to them: "Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it" (Gen 37:6-7). If God gave him that dream (which the Bible doesn't say God did), Joseph is under no obligation to share it with his brothers. Yet, his attitude has already been made clear. Joseph has already tattled on them (Gen 37:2), and now he is bragging he will lord it over them, flaunting that he is to inherit and not them.



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Alienating his brothers is a bad idea. The ancient world had no police force. Your *family* was the one to protect you from wandering caravans. Yet, Joseph's brothers don't protect him. Instead they are the very ones who sell him to the caravan. The very likely reason that removing the favored son of Rachel will ensure that Reuben will inherit and thus guarantee a better future for all their *families*. Later Jewish texts emphasize this by saying that the brothers use the money to buy shoes for their families.

Yet, with all this family dysfunction, God still fulfills his promise to Abraham. God watches over Joseph; God does not abandon those who sin. Joseph is not sold to some unknown farmer. He ends up at a country estate of a high-ranking Egyptian official, Potiphar, the captain of the guard.

Potiphar's wife—note that she is never named, because this part of the story is about Joseph and Potiphar—takes a shine to Joseph and invites him to bed. Joseph refuses. Good for him, but we should note why. (There aren't Ten Commandments yet.) Joseph states: "'With me in charge,' he told her, 'my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?'" (Gen 39:8-9). Joseph states he is the greatest person in the house and Potiphar has put everything (including her) into Joseph's hand. We are supposed to notice that Joseph has placed himself above her as well as above all the other slaves. They are his new household unit, but the same arrogance he had with his brothers he has here.

Of course, Potiphar is going to know what happened. Slaves see what's going on, and someone will pass the word to Potiphar. She lies to Potiphar and says that Joseph tried to seduce (or rape) her. Potiphar is enraged. We should be careful not to simply read our modern individualist values into this story. We have no idea whether Potiphar loved this wife, but he would have cared about the dishonor and the lack of loyalty shown to him by either his wife or his favored servant. He has two choices:

1. He publicly supports his wife's story: a slave has attacked her. The punishment was routine. The slave would be executed.
2. He publicly supports his head slave and disgraces his wife. The result was routine. He would divorce her.

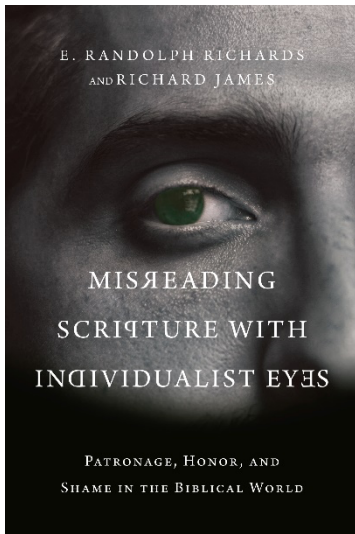
It seems that whatever Potiphar decides to do, he loses. He clearly doesn't believe his wife's story, because Joseph isn't executed. But if he sides with his wife, then he loses the best estate manager he has ever had (Gen 39:2-3). An honest and successful manager was hard to find. Jesus told several parables about lousy servant-managers on estates (Lk 12; 16). On the other hand, if he sides with Joseph, then he must divorce his wife. Since she hasn't committed adultery (at least according to the story he got), if he divorces her the bridal price, almost certainly the estate, will go back to her family.



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Thus, Potiphar can keep the estate and lose his manager, or he can keep the manager and lose the estate. Potiphar is furious that Joseph has put him in this mess.

Potiphar decides to keep ~~the estate~~ his wife. But we are to notice that not only is Joseph not executed, but he is placed in the best prison in Egypt, the one where the king's servants are placed. We think of prisons as solitary places, but Joseph is given a new community. Yet again, Joseph rises to prominence in his community. But something is different. This time, for the first time, Joseph doesn't alienate his new community. He hit rock bottom, but he has at last learned how to live as a member of a community. Finally, Joseph is ready to be used by God to be put in charge of another community: Egypt.

But this is not the climactic end of the story. This is only part one in the restoration story. The happy ending where we celebrate the saving work of God comes at the end, when Joseph and his brothers and father are restored (Gen 45). Joseph uses his status to care for his family. He provides for all his brothers' families as he should have done at the beginning. More than that, they are relationally restored as brothers who care for one another (Gen 45:14-15). The dysfunctional family is restored. Sin is overcome.

Clearly, kinship plays a very important role throughout the story. It starts with a family and ends with a family. The part that is all about Joseph on his own is not the good part but the bad part. We haven't highlighted it, but Joseph was also supposed to be his brothers' patron, someone expected to use his status to protect and care for others. Joseph fails to fulfill this role initially, but then he does at the end. Potiphar was Joseph's patron, as was Pharaoh. Several times, we see a broker—a middleman or a mediator—working to join two parties in the story. Reuben attempts to mediate or broker several times for Joseph with the other brothers. Someone may have been able to mediate with Potiphar or his wife. Joseph asks the cupbearer to broker for him with Pharaoh.

Kinship, patronage, and brokerage are key social structures in the story. The author assumes his intended audience knows these social structures. They surely did; they were collectives and lived in such cultures. They would have recognized how these values were at play. Equally important (or perhaps even more so), the audience is expected to notice when these values should be in play but are not. To ancient hearers (and many modern collective ears), it is obvious that Joseph's arrogance played a role in his being separated from his community, as did his father's passivity and his brothers' fear and jealousy. Collectivists recognize immediately that this is a story about a family (as are all the patriarchal stories). When Joseph needs his community's help, it often doesn't come. The plights of Joseph were the obvious consequences for someone who cut himself off from his community. Thankfully, salvation is a family matter in the story. God has promised much to Abraham and his descendants (Gen 12:1-4). Despite the broken family and failings, God is faithful. He is the star of the story.

—Adapted from part one: *Social Structures of the Biblical World*



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