

A MacGuffin, as you may or may not know, is an object, device, or event that is necessary to advance the plot in a story. It makes its appearance early in the story, and then diminishes in importance to the audience. Alfred Hitchcock popularized the term, when his films repeatedly employed MacGuffins whose evident importance turned out to be illusory. An example of a MacGuffin is the Holy Grail in the legends of King Arthur. The knights are always going out in search of the Holy Grail, and they never find it but the real point of their stories is always their adventures. The Holy Grail is just an excuse to get the story rolling.

Much is made of Joseph's cleverness, or his giftedness, in Genesis, but I'm going to make the case that it's a MacGuffin. It's a thing that his whole family takes seriously, whether they like it or not, and their feelings about his giftedness get the story rolling, but it turns out not to be important. Something else is more important.

I know you all know the story, but I'm going to run through it in order to highlight the features that make my case. Last week we heard about Abraham and Sarah; this week we're looking at the family of their grandson Jacob. Jacob has two concubines and two wives; his wives are sisters (Leah and Rachel), and the one he *loves* is Rachel. Leah is older than Rachel. For that matter, Jacob is a younger son and shouldn't have the benefits he got, but that's another story. He was tricked into marrying Leah, and he has a bunch of children with her, but Rachel is the one he wanted originally, and she has trouble conceiving, so Jacob and his younger brother Benjamin are the sons of Jacob's old age—special because they are Rachel's and maybe because it took such a long time for her to bear children.

Jacob blatantly plays favorites, listening to Joseph when he tattles on the older sons, and giving Joseph the famous coat of many colors. By the way, I learned that the other time

this term is used (“long coat with sleeves”) is to describe what the daughters of a king wore in 2 Samuel, so it’s like Joseph is wearing his princess coat. A little foreshadowing. Jacob plays favorites. The other boys don’t like it. Joseph makes it worse by repeating dreams he’s had in which various objects that symbolize family members bow down to objects symbolizing himself. That’s obnoxious in anyone, and especially in a younger brother.

So Joseph is just special: young and cocky and handsome, unscarred by adversity, and gifted with dreams that promise great things for him. That’s what Jacob sees when he looks at him dotingly, and that’s what his brothers see when they get dressed in the morning to prepare for another hard day of shepherding for the old man. It’s that shine, that giftedness, that irritates the brothers to the point of wanting to kill Joseph—he’s a magnet for all the love and consideration that their father should be spreading around to all of them. And so when they have the opportunity, far from home, to get rid of Joseph, they do. There seems to be some inner turmoil between them and within a couple of them—Reuben secretly plans to rescue Joseph when the others aren’t looking, and while Reuben is out of the room Judah gets the boys to agree to sell Joseph to slave traders, so that Reuben is out of his wits terrified when he gets back and Joseph is gone. But they all agree to dip Joseph’s fancy coat in animal blood and let Jacob draw his own conclusions, which he does.

Our reading skips a good deal of action at this point and takes us to a much later point, when Joseph has become an important official in Egypt and his brothers show up looking for food, because there’s a famine all over the known world. Joseph had saved up grain in Egypt, but back home there was nothing, so the boys had no choice but to travel far away and try to buy some food, which is what took them to Egypt. Joseph recognizes them, but they don’t

recognize him. I have found this part of the story agonizing since I was a child. He messes around with them *so much*. He sends them here, he sends them there, he frames Benjamin for theft, it just takes *so long* before he finally reveals who he is to them. But he does, and then they're terrified. They make the proper apologies, Joseph arranges for the whole family to move to Egypt, but once they're settled, Jacob dies, and the boys are terrified all over again: "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?"

They go to Joseph and say, "Your father gave this instruction before he died. 'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him; his brothers also wept . . . Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? 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."

This is the part I really wanted to get to. **Does Joseph believe his brothers?** I am fascinated by this gambit on their part. "Dad said before he died that we should tell you not to be mad at us." I am fascinated by this because there is a crucial transfer of authority and responsibility at this point. Up until and including, this moment, the family dynamics have been driven by Jacob's, the father's, opinions and preferences, real or perceived. The boys hate Joseph *because* Jacob prefers him. Joseph was special *because* Jacob preferred him. There's a sense in which Jacob is the unseen arbiter of all conflicts; everyone turns to him or invokes his authority to figure out what to do next. At this moment, when the brothers once again invoke their father to get things to go their way, Joseph breaks through the old family dynamic and

speaks for himself. He says, in essence, “It doesn’t matter *what* Dad said or thought. I am telling you that I hold no grudge. God has this in hand; it is God’s way to bring good out of evil, and I’m staking our future on that.”

I think it just doesn’t matter to Joseph any more what Jacob said. He may believe his brothers, he may not. I personally don’t. But it doesn’t matter because Jacob is gone, nobody is going to do the patriarch job now, and the negotiation of the brothers’ relationship lies with the brothers themselves. Was Joseph special and gifted? Jacob thought so, but Jacob’s gone, and it just doesn’t matter. It’s up to the brothers to establish who they want to be to one another.

What Joseph does display in this moment is wisdom—which he may not always have had, but which he’s developed over a long, bewildering, complicated life. “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people.” He’s reflecting a hard-won insight that everything we see is not everything there is. When things went very badly for Joseph or for his family, that was not a sign that God was angry or negligent. When things went well, that wasn’t a sign that God was pleased with them or more than usually effective. God’s arc is quite a bit longer than ours. What Joseph has learned, and what I think he wants his brothers to understand, is that God is up to way more than our frames or authority structures can account for. Not only can we not invoke Dad as a referee for our relationship going forward, but we probably shouldn’t have kept that burden on him past the time we’d grown up. We, Jacob’s sons, used an old family framework to define what was possible for us, when the only real definer of what’s possible was God, all along.

This is why I think Joseph’s specialness is a MacGuffin. It was just a thing their dad

thought because of silly reasons. Each of the boys was special, I'm sure, and they all had stories. Joseph's "specialness" and the family dynamics around it got him into Egypt, and *that's* what he thinks God was serious about. God was going to find a way somehow to get them to Egypt, where important things would happen, and in good time, as we know, God would find a way to get them out of Egypt. The important thing that I think happened to Joseph, and that he wanted to happen to his brothers, was to understand that their father's arbitrariness was not authoritative, that they had it in their power to redefine their relationship to each other. The sense of scarcity (of love) that they'd grown up with was just a construct. Joseph sees that God offers infinite possibilities, and invites his brothers to enter that reality with him.

Our own batteries are running low now in some ways, with COVID and political dysfunction and all the ways we seem to have to struggle just to keep from drowning. This story encourages us to look for abundance. It encourages us to hold the sufficiency of God's promises higher than our sense of scarcity. It's certainly the case that the old referees aren't coming through for us and setting everything straight. But God is still God, and offers infinite possibility for good. Alice Walker once wrote, "The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any." We do have power, because God is running the universe. The frames that flawed people have constructed are not the last word. There is infinite possibility ahead.

God of dreams and hope,
You spoke to Joseph in his dreams, and those dreams led him to great danger. Yet you used the challenges in his life to save the lives of others. In you, no good thing is accidental. You work in us and through us, even when we are not aware of your presence. Help us to know that you are with us, and that you are capable of turning all evil to good. We pray all these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Redeemer. Amen.