



Really Useful Guides

Genesis 12–50

Richard S. Briggs

Series editor: Simon Stocks

The Bible Reading Fellowship

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To my companions in Christian living at St Mary's Sherburn – with thanks for sharing in the joy of being part of God's church together.

I am grateful to Simon Stocks for the invitation to write this little book, and to Melody Briggs and Walter Moberly for their many helpful comments on the text.

Each Really Useful Guide focuses on a specific biblical book, making it come to life for the reader, enabling them to understand the message and to apply its truth to today's circumstances. Though not a commentary, it gives valuable insight into the book's message. Though not an introduction, it summarises the important aspects of the book to aid reading and application.

This Really Useful Guide to Genesis 12–50 will transform your understanding of the biblical text, and will help you to engage with the message in new ways today, giving confidence in the Bible and increasing faith in God.

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1

Welcome to Genesis 12—50

A few years after I became a Christian, it occurred to me that I had never read through a whole book of the Bible – in one sitting – from beginning to end. I was reading the Bible a lot, but always in small sections and extracts. So early one morning, I sat in the corner of the kitchen, turned on a small table lamp in the darkness, opened my Bible to Genesis 1 and began reading. About two hours later, I closed the book at the end of Genesis 50, amazed at the story that had unfolded as I read.

It was like reading the world's first soap opera. After a most spectacular introduction, the story zoomed in on Abraham and his extended family, in and around what we call the 'ancient Near East'. So it seemed to me like 'ancient Near Eastenders'.

There were lovable heroes; unlovable heroes; twists and turns from joy to despair and back again; men and women praying and plotting, wheeling and dealing,

weeping and dying. The key family seemed to be a strong candidate for the most dysfunctional of all time – buying and selling each other, lying about each other and leaving each other to desolation and even abuse. Yet they somehow stayed (more or less) together through it all. There were angels and visions, afternoon tea with God in person and a strange story about God (or was it an angel?) wrestling with Jacob through the night. At the end, there was even a long section that I recognised from singing in the choir of our school production of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat*. By breakfast time, I had been to another world and back.

I actually learned two things from that journey. First, I learned that the best way to get to know a long Bible story is indeed to read it all the way through. Start by reading it as one long story, not getting stuck on all the details and questions it raises.

Second, I learned that the Bible can be treated well and with respect precisely by taking it as seriously as we take our favourite films and TV shows: by immersing ourselves in their worlds and letting the stories do their work on us. In other words, taking the Bible seriously involves using our imagination. You cannot enjoy a film when you interrupt it every few minutes

to ask, ‘How did they do that?’ or ‘Who is the guy in the corner with the camel?’ Once you know and love the film, those questions make more sense. Likewise, once you know and love Genesis, those kinds of detailed questions have an important place. But first, you have to let your imagination run with the story. You have to jump in and hear and see it playing out on its own wide-screen terms.

This Really Useful Guide to Genesis 12—50 aims to get you up and running with enjoying the story, and then it looks at some interesting questions to ask about it. It is a guide to what you might do with this great big family drama that takes up most of the first book of our Bibles. How can you read it wisely and know what to look out for?

Most of all, I hope that you will end up on the same journey that I took one morning all those years ago, before breakfast, in the semi-darkness, watching a world – our world – take shape. Do you think that God knew that the best way to open up the Bible was with a fascinating story about men and women of faith and all their ups and downs?

Before we go any further...

Stop and read Genesis! Do what I did that morning in my kitchen. Get hold of a Bible, find a couple of hours with no phone or interruptions (breakfast is optional), and sit down and read it all the way through.

By the way, it really does not matter which translation you choose. There are a lot of different well-known Bible translations available (since Genesis, like most of the Old Testament, was originally written in ancient Hebrew). I quote from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). The most important thing is that you have a clearly printed Bible – and don't get distracted by notes or links to other things worth knowing about. Enjoy your reading.

2

What is Genesis 12—50?

Genesis 12—50 is not actually a book in itself. It is part of a longer book – Genesis – which is in turn part of a series of five books. This series is often called either the Books of Moses or the Pentateuch, which means ‘five books’. The Pentateuch is in turn part of a longer collection: the whole Bible. In the Jewish faith, these five books have a special importance as the foundation of Jewish scripture. In the Christian faith, they remain in first place, as part of the Old Testament, in a Bible that goes on to also include the New Testament. Do Jews and Christians read Genesis the same way? Yes and no. It is the same book, but in different contexts. We will look out for examples of what difference this makes as we go on.

Sometimes I am going to cheat and call Genesis 12—50 a book. Although Genesis tells one continuous story from chapter 1 through to chapter 50, there is an important change of pace and focus at the beginning of chapter 12. Suddenly, we are looking in detail at

one person, Abraham, and what happened to his family over several years. According to Genesis 11:10–26, Abraham was the latest in a long line of descendants that goes back to the sons of Noah, and before that all the way to Adam. So Genesis 12 is in one way simply the next part of the story.

But readers of Genesis have always noticed that there is this major change at chapter 12. So for practical purposes, we have divided our Really Useful Guide to Genesis into two separate guides, and you should consult the Genesis 1–11 guide for those chapters.

At the other end of the story, Genesis 50 both is and is not a conclusion. It does wrap up the stories of Jacob, who is Abraham's grandson, and Joseph, Abraham's great-grandson. This is not really followed up any further in the Bible, so there is a kind of ending here. Turn the page to Exodus 1 and we find a kind of new beginning. Now there is a new pharaoh in Egypt 'who did not know Joseph' (Exodus 1:8), and we are into the story of Moses. This new beginning is more like a new season of a TV drama, rather than a completely new show. For example, it is like *Doctor Who* with a new Doctor.

So it is useful to think of Genesis 12–50 as a book, as long as you remember that it is actually an episode (or a whole series of episodes) in a longer-running drama.



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A guide to the great big family drama that takes up most of the first book of our Bibles. How can you read it wisely, and know what to look out for?

This Really Useful Guide to Genesis 12–50 unpacks the fascinating family stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. Richard S. Briggs takes us on a tour of these characters' lives, suggesting different ways of approaching the stories to draw out different facets and looking at how God can be found throughout. With a discussion of the historical background of Genesis and a detailed look at a few key passages, this book will increase your biblical knowledge and make you more aware of God's presence in everyday life.

Revd Dr Richard Briggs is lecturer in Old Testament and director of biblical studies at Cranmer Hall, St John's College, Durham. He also currently serves as associate minister in two local parishes in County Durham.



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