

A Theo-Psychological Study of Divine Forgetfulness in Joseph Narrative in Genesis 41: 51.

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Abstract

Genesis 41:51 is a pivotal verse in the Joseph narrative. This act signifies a profound divine intervention, transforming Joseph's traumatic past into a future of promise. This study exegetically analyzed the text, delving into its theological and psychological dimensions. Historical and exegetical methods were used for the study. The study reveals how divine forgetfulness is not merely an erasure of memory but a transformative grace. Theologically, it underscores God's active role in alleviating human suffering and facilitating reconciliation and new beginnings. Psychologically, it aligns with contemporary theories on memory and trauma, suggesting that divinely enabled forgetfulness aids in overcoming past adversities and fostering resilience. This study bridges ancient scriptural insights with modern psychological practices, providing valuable perspectives for theologians, scholars, and pastoral caregivers. It redefines forgetfulness as a divine gift, crucial for healing and fulfilling one's potential within God's providential framework. This groundbreaking approach challenges traditional views, presenting divine forgetfulness as a key to spiritual and emotional liberation, making this study a reference point for contemporary theological and psychological discourse.

Keywords: Divine Forgetfulness, Theological, Psychological, Resilience, and Joseph.

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Introduction

Genesis 41:51 is a crucial verse in the broader narrative of Joseph, a story that spans Genesis 37-50. This verse occurs after Joseph's ascension to power in Egypt, where he names his firstborn son Manasseh, explaining, "It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's

household” (NIV). This naming reflects a significant moment of transformation and healing in Joseph's life. The narrative of Joseph is marked by a series of dramatic events, beginning with his favoured status in his father Jacob's house, which provokes jealousy and hatred among his brothers. This animosity culminates in his brothers selling him into slavery (Genesis 37:12-28). Joseph's journey is fraught with trials: from being falsely accused by Potiphar's wife and imprisoned (Genesis 39) to interpreting dreams in prison, which eventually leads to his rise to power as Pharaoh's second-in-command (Genesis 40-41).

By the time the story reaches Genesis 41:51, Joseph has undergone significant personal and spiritual development. The act of naming his son Manasseh, which means "causing to forget," signifies a profound turning point. It denotes a release from the psychological burden of his past sufferings and familial estrangement. This act of naming is not merely about personal relief but also reflects a broader theme of divine providence and redemption. Joseph attributes his ability to forget his hardships to God, indicating that his forgetfulness is not a natural occurrence but a divine intervention. The purpose of this study is to delve deeply into the concept of forgetfulness as presented in Genesis 41:51, examining it as a divine gift rather than a mere psychological coping mechanism.

This requires a thorough exegetical analysis of the verse within its immediate and broader biblical context. The study aims to uncover the theological significance of this forgetfulness and how it functions as a part of divine grace and providence in Joseph's life. By examining the original Hebrew text and its nuances, historical-cultural background, and literary context, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the verse. This includes an analysis of key terms such as "forget" (נָשַׁח, *nashani*) and "God" (אֱלֹהִים, *Elohim*), exploring how these concepts are interwoven to convey a message of divine intervention and healing. Additionally, the study will

consider the implications of this divine forgetfulness for contemporary theological thought and psychological practice. By bridging ancient scriptural insights with modern applications, the study aims to offer valuable perspectives for both scholars and practitioners in fields such as theology, pastoral care, and counselling.

By utilizing a combination of textual criticism, historical-contextual analysis, and literary analysis, and by drawing upon a rich array of primary and secondary sources, this exegetical study of Genesis 41:51 aims to uncover the profound theological and psychological dimensions of Joseph's forgetfulness. This comprehensive approach not only enhances our understanding of the biblical text but also provides valuable insights for contemporary theological and psychological discussions.

Literary Analysis of Genesis 41: 51

Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh and said, "It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household." NIV

Genesis 41:51 is set against the backdrop of Joseph's dramatic life story. Sold into slavery by his brothers, Joseph rises to a position of power in Egypt after interpreting Pharaoh's dreams. This verse captures a moment of personal triumph and divine intervention, reflecting Joseph's journey from betrayal and imprisonment to authority and reconciliation. Brueggemann, highlights that this naming of Manasseh is a declaration of Joseph's emotional and psychological recovery through divine assistance (Brueggemann, 322). In ancient Egypt and Israel, names were often laden with meaning and reflected personal or communal experiences. Forgetfulness, in this context, was not merely about memory loss but involved a broader sense of release from past grievances and suffering. Walton, explains that for Joseph, naming his son Manasseh signified a

culturally and personally significant act of leaving behind the hardships of his familial relationships and previous life (Walton, 75).

This text plays a critical role in the larger narrative of Joseph's story. It marks a turning point where Joseph acknowledges the transformative power of God in his life. This verse not only signifies Joseph's reconciliation with his past but also sets the stage for his eventual reunion with his family. Alter argues that this narrative device is crucial for understanding Joseph's character development and the themes of providence and forgiveness (Alter, 1981: 145). The naming of Manasseh is rich in symbolic meaning. It signifies Joseph's release from the emotional burden of his past and highlights the theme of divine providence. The act of naming, as Hamilton points out, symbolizes Joseph's acknowledgment of God's hand in his journey, transforming his suffering into a source of blessing (Hamilton, 505). Additionally, Volf notes that this act of naming and the associated forgetfulness reflect a theological process of healing and reorientation towards God's future plans (Volf, 144).

It was in this verse that Joseph names his firstborn son Manasseh, saying, "It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household" (NIV), that has been the subject of extensive exegetical analysis. Scholars have approached this verse by situating it within the broader narrative of Joseph's life, emphasizing its thematic and theological significance. One prominent exegetical perspective focuses on the motif of divine providence and reconciliation in the Joseph story. Von Rad interprets Joseph's declaration as a testament to God's intervention, allowing Joseph to transcend his past grievances and embrace his new identity in Egypt (Von Rad, 1972: 367). This perspective is supported by Brueggemann, who suggests that Joseph's forgetfulness symbolizes a divine act of healing, enabling him to fulfil his role in God's plan for Israel (Brueggemann, 1982: 322).

Moreover, the etymology of "Manasseh" (נַשְׁחִי, nashani), which means "causing to forget," is pivotal in understanding the theological dimensions of the text. Hamilton argues that the naming reflects a transformation in Joseph's character, marking a transition from suffering to a state of divine blessing (Hamilton, 1995: 505). Similarly, Wenham highlights how this act of naming encapsulates a broader theme of forgiveness and reconciliation within the patriarchal narratives (Wenham, 1994: 398).

Exegesis of Genesis 41: 51

Attempt is made in this part of the study to exegetically consider the text under review. Genesis 41:51 reads: “וַיִּקְרָא יוֹסֵף אֶת־שֵׁם הַבְּכוֹר מְנַשֶּׁה כִּי־נִשְׁחִי אֱלֹהִים אֶת־כָּל־עֲמָלִי וְאֶת כָּל־בֵּית אָבִי”. This can be translated as: “Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh and said, ‘It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father’s household’” (NIV). The word יוֹסֵף (Yosef), is a noun. This is the subject of the verb call וַיִּקְרָא, is a proper noun in the construct state, directly identifying Joseph as the actor who performs the naming. The word אֶת־שֵׁם (*et-shem*), is the direct object marker *et* (*et*) signifies that שֵׁם (*shem*), meaning "name," is the direct object of the verb. The use of *et* as a marker indicates the importance of the noun that follows (Cassuto, 1961: 204).

The word מְנַשֶּׁה (*Menasheh*), is a proper noun meaning "Manasseh." The name is derived from the root נָשַׁח (*nashah*), meaning "to forget." The root נָשַׁח (*nashah*) means "to forget" or "to cause to forget." This term implies a divinely enabled ability to move beyond past hardships. In Akkadian, the term *nasû* means "to forget," showing a shared Semitic root that conveys the idea of forgetting or causing to forget (Cohen, 2013: 234). This semantic range includes the nuances of both intentional and unintentional forgetting. According to Hamilton, the term suggests not an absolute erasure of memory but a shift in the emotional impact of past events (Hamilton, 1995:

505). The structure of the phrase highlights the significance of the name, which is central to the narrative's thematic message. This name symbolizes the transformative work of God in Joseph's life, marking a transition from suffering to blessing (Von Rad, 367).

The verb root is קרא (*qara*), meaning "to call" or "to name." The prefix ו (wa) indicates consecutive action, showing a continuation of the narrative flow. The wayyiqtol form combines the waw conjunction with the imperfect tense, often used to indicate actions that move the narrative forward (Waltke, 1990: 543). According to the text, it was "God" (אֱלֹהִים, Elohim) that made the forgetfulness possible. This term is used to denote the supreme deity in Hebrew theology, emphasizing God's role in Joseph's healing process. Wenham notes that Elohim here underscores the divine initiative in alleviating Joseph's emotional burdens (Wenham, 1994: 398). The verb נָשַׁח (nashani) is in the Hiphil form, a causative stem in Brown-Driver-Briggs highlights that the root נָשַׁח (nashah) is often used in contexts implying a release from past burdens or troubles. The emotional connotation suggests a healing process facilitated by divine action (Brown, 2000: 672). This term emphasizes the divine initiative in Joseph's emotional healing process. Elohim is often used to denote the supreme deity in Hebrew theology, and its use here underscores God's active role in transforming Joseph's experience. The Greek verb ἐπελάθειν corresponds to the Hebrew נָשַׁח again indicating forgetfulness but with a slightly different connotation. The Greek term suggests an active forgetting, consistent with divine intervention in Joseph's emotional healing (Brenton, 1851: 73). While the Hebrew grammar, indicates that the action is caused by an external force, in this case, God. The suffix נִי (ni) indicates the first-person singular, meaning "me." This grammatical construction emphasizes that God is the agent causing Joseph to forget (Jouon, 2006: 156).

Also, the Hiphil form indicates that forgetfulness is actively induced by God. The use of נָשָׁח reflects not a passive fading of memory but an active divine intervention in Joseph's psychological state, allowing him to move beyond his past sufferings (Hamilton, 1995: 512). The conjunction וְ (ve) means "and," linking this phrase to the previous direct object. כָּל-בֵּית אָבִי (kol-beit avi) means "all my father's house," emphasizing that Joseph is able to move past the familial strife as well. This shows a comprehensive scope of the forgetfulness bestowed by God, covering both personal and familial troubles. The phrase אֶת-כָּל-עֲמָלִי functions as the direct object of the verb שָׁחַח (shachach). כָּל (kol) means "all" or "every," and עֲמָלִי (amali) means "my trouble" or "my labor." The construction indicates the totality of Joseph's past hardships that God has caused him to forget.

Theological Perspectives

The concept of forgetfulness in the Bible often carries profound theological implications, particularly regarding divine grace and human forgiveness. In Genesis 41:51, forgetfulness is portrayed not merely as a psychological escape but as a divine gift that facilitates healing and renewal. Theologically, forgetfulness can be seen as an aspect of God's providential care. Augustine in his "Confessions" interprets forgetfulness as a mechanism by which God enables humans to move beyond past sins and traumas, thus promoting spiritual growth and redemption (Augustine, 1991: 238). This view is echoed by modern theologians such as Moltmann, who argue that divine forgetfulness allows individuals to participate in God's redemptive plan by freeing them from the burdens of their past (Moltmann, 2004: 112). Furthermore, Volf explores the idea of "remembering rightly," suggesting that divine forgetfulness does not imply the erasure of memory but a transformation of its significance. In the context of Genesis 41:51, Joseph's forgetfulness is not about denying his past but reinterpreting it in light of God's overarching narrative of salvation and blessing (Volf, 2006: 144).

Psychological Insights of Genesis 41: 51

Contemporary psychological theories provide valuable insights into the role of forgetfulness and memory, particularly in relation to trauma and healing. Freud's early work on repression suggests that forgetting painful memories can serve as a defence mechanism, allowing individuals to cope with traumatic experiences. This theory aligns with Joseph's experience, where divine forgetfulness functions as a means of psychological and emotional relief (Freud, 1915: 150). More recent psychological research emphasizes the adaptive functions of forgetfulness. Anderson and Green propose the "motivated forgetting" theory, where forgetting is an active process that helps individuals manage emotional stress and focus on positive future outcomes. This perspective can be applied to Genesis 41:51, where Joseph's ability to forget his past troubles is seen as a divinely enabled coping strategy that facilitates his integration into Egyptian society and his successful leadership role (Anderson, 2001: 369).

Additionally, the concept of post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun) highlights how individuals can experience significant personal development following traumatic events. In Joseph's case, his forgetfulness, facilitated by divine intervention, allows him to transcend his past hardships and achieve a position of power and responsibility, ultimately leading to the preservation of his family during famine (Tedeschi, 2004: 3).

The central thesis of this study is that forgetfulness, as depicted in Genesis 41:51, is a divine gift bestowed upon Joseph. This forgetfulness is not simply an erasure of memory but a transformative grace that enables Joseph to overcome his traumatic past and fulfil his God-given purpose. This divine gift of forgetfulness has significant implications for both theological understanding and psychological well-being. In theological terms, the forgetfulness granted to

Joseph signifies God's active role in the healing and restoration of individuals. It highlights a theme of divine providence where God intervenes to alleviate the burdens of past suffering, allowing for new beginnings and the fulfilment of divine promises. These understanding challenges traditional views of memory and forgetfulness, positioning them within a framework of divine grace and intervention.

From a psychological perspective, the study posits that forgetfulness can serve as a beneficial process in overcoming trauma and fostering resilience. Joseph's experience suggests that divine forgetfulness is not about losing memory but about reorienting one's life narrative in a way that the past no longer hinders future potential. This has practical implications for fields such as counselling and therapy, where understanding the role of memory and forgetfulness can aid in the healing process.

Practical Applications

In cognitive psychology, forgetfulness is often seen not as a defect but as a beneficial process. Forgetting can serve several adaptive functions, such as reducing cognitive load and emotional distress. Anderson and Green propose that motivated forgetting, the process by which people intentionally suppress memories, can help manage unwanted memories and alleviate associated stress (Anderson, & Green, 369). This aligns with the narrative of Joseph in Genesis 41:51, where forgetfulness facilitated his psychological healing and enabled him to move forward. The suppression of painful memories, akin to Joseph's experience, is supported by Freud's theory of repression. Freud argued that repression serves as a defense mechanism, allowing individuals to protect themselves from distressing thoughts and feelings (Freud, 150). Contemporary research supports this, suggesting that the ability to forget can contribute to mental well-being and

resilience. Joseph's divine forgetfulness can be seen as a psychological coping mechanism, provided by God, to help him cope with his traumatic past and thrive in his new role.

For contemporary believers, the concept of forgetfulness as depicted in Genesis 41:51 can be embraced as a spiritual practice. Forgetfulness, in this context, is not about neglecting important memories or responsibilities but about releasing the emotional burdens of the past to live more fully in the present and future. Volf discusses the idea of "remembering rightly," which involves holding onto memories in a way that promotes forgiveness and reconciliation rather than resentment (Volf, 144). Spiritual forgetfulness can be understood as part of this process—releasing the grip of negative memories to experience divine peace and grace. Practicing forgetfulness can thus be a means of spiritual growth, enabling believers to let go of past hurts and focus on their divine purpose. Incorporating mindfulness practices that emphasize letting go of negative thoughts can help believers apply this principle in their lives. Walton suggests that spiritual practices which focus on gratitude and present awareness can aid in the process of divine forgetfulness, helping individuals to reframe their past experiences in light of God's ongoing work in their lives (Walton, 75).

In pastoral counselling, the therapeutic aspects of forgetfulness can be invaluable. Counsellors can help individuals understand that forgetting, as seen in Joseph's story, is a gift that allows for emotional healing and the possibility of new beginnings. This perspective can be particularly helpful for those struggling with past traumas and unresolved issues. Pastoral counsellors can use Genesis 41:51 as a scriptural basis to encourage individuals to embrace God's provision of forgetfulness as a healing tool. Brueggemann notes that viewing forgetfulness through a theological lens can provide comfort and hope, as it demonstrates God's active role in alleviating human suffering (Brueggemann, 322). Counsellors can guide individuals to reframe their life

stories by emphasizing God's intervention and transformative power. This approach, known as narrative therapy, allows individuals to see their experiences in a new light, similar to the biblical story of Joseph. By identifying moments where they believe God's hand was at work, they can create a more empowering narrative that highlights resilience and growth.

In addition to narrative therapy, practical activities focused on forgiveness and release can help individuals practice spiritual forgetfulness. These forgiveness exercises might include structured prayer sessions where individuals seek divine assistance in forgiving those who have wronged them. Meditation practices can be designed to cultivate a sense of peace and acceptance, helping individuals let go of lingering anger and resentment. Reflective journaling is another powerful tool; by writing about their experiences and emotions, individuals can process their feelings and gradually release the grip of past grievances. Cognitive-behavioural approaches can also be integrated into this therapeutic process. These techniques involve challenging and changing negative thought patterns, promoting a healthier mental outlook. For instance, counsellors might work with individuals to identify and reframe thoughts that contribute to feelings of bitterness or unforgiveness. According to Hamilton, understanding forgetfulness as an active, divine process can further aid this transformation. By seeing the act of forgetting past wrongs as part of a divine plan, individuals can develop mental and emotional habits that align with this perspective, fostering a more positive and forgiving mindset (Hamilton, 505).

Conclusion

The study of Genesis 41:51 reveals Joseph's naming of his firstborn son Manasseh as a pivotal act symbolizing divine intervention and emotional healing. This forgetfulness, divinely enabled, is not about erasing memories but transforming their emotional impact, allowing Joseph

to move past his traumas and rise to power in Egypt. By examining the Hebrew terms and historical context, one can understand that Joseph's experience highlights God's active role in alleviating past sufferings and facilitating new beginnings. Theological perspectives view this divine forgetfulness as part of God's grace, enabling reconciliation and participation in divine plans. Psychological insights align with this, suggesting that forgetfulness can be an adaptive process for managing emotional stress and fostering resilience. For contemporary believers, this concept offers a spiritual practice of releasing past burdens to embrace divine peace and purpose. Genesis 41:51 demonstrates that divine forgetfulness is a transformative gift, facilitating healing and enabling individuals to fulfil their potential within God's providential framework. This understanding provides valuable insights for theological reflection and practical applications in pastoral care and counselling.

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