

Ethical Leadership in the Pit, Prison and Palace: Life Experiences of Joseph

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Abstract

In a world of unfair competition and the survival of the fittest, ethical leadership, free will, and choice are relegated. What becomes prominent is traditional leadership through manipulation, force, transactions, control, rules, and regulations to be obeyed. The objectives of this study are to examine Joseph's experiences in the Pit, Prison, and Palace through the lens of ethical leadership. To show the strength of the attendant moral values of ethical leadership in the life of Joseph. The Methodology was Qualitative Content Analysis. The design was framed on the biblical narratives of Joseph and the principles of ethical leadership. Consequently, the primary source of textual data was the Bible, while the secondary source was the ethical leadership literature. The textual datasets were coded according to the six thematic steps outlined by Brain and Clarke. Thematic analysis was adopted. It was found that Joseph was betrayed and severely punished in the Pit. But this valley experience was preparatory for his prison episode. Though he was innocent of the charge, he refused to make counteraccusations to prove it. He was ethical and revealed deep spiritual insight. True to type, at the Palace, he was humble and forbearing. He showed forgiveness to his brothers when he could repay them. Joseph's behaviour in the Pit, Prison, and Palace suggests he had ethical depth. In distinguishing between right and wrong, he was not affected by his circumstances in standing for the right. Overall, in life-or-death situations, Joseph ethically subordinated his will to God's will. Had he pursued his own schemes, his history would have ended in the pit or in the embrace of Potiphar's wife. This has implications for humanistic and vengeful tendencies.

Keywords: Joseph, Ethical Leadership, Pit, Prison, and Palace

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Introduction

The circumstances of life have their difficulties. There are clear cases of vendetta, wickedness, and evil machinations. Ethical leadership remains stable, correct, and morally adequate in decisions and actions. An ethical leader demonstrates integrity (Ahmad et al., 2023) and faithfulness in every moral decision. This way, the leader influences followers and encourages ethical standards in the organisation (Brown et al, 2005; Malik, 2022). These ethical standards include principles such as fairness, responsibility, accountability, and empathy. Ughulu (2024) and Harvard DCE (2024) explained that such ethical practise implies leadership that considers the general good of employees, stakeholders, and society at large. In a world of sin, ethical leadership has become more relevant than ever. This is because organisations need to maintain credibility, establish organisational culture, and build goodwill (Caldeira, 2025).

The theoretical foundation of ethical leadership is based on social learning theory. This theory explains that role models are the main sources of learning behaviours. The observant followers replicate such behaviour in the organisation (Brown et al, 2005; Bandura, 1986). This enriches the ethical climate and establishes the organisation's ethical culture (Olley, 2023). Ethical leadership is relevant not only to the organisation but also to employee effectiveness. Serang (2024) argues that it increases employees' commitment and productivity. Communication and collaboration within the organisation accelerate learning and innovation (Zhu et al., 2025). Most employees become very responsible. The culture of trust and good neighbourliness fosters responsibility and authenticity (Santiago-Torner, 2025). All these lead to the organisation's going concern and continued success (Caldeira 2025). In the modern workplace, Ughulu (2024) asserts that ethical leadership can help organisations overcome the challenges posed by technology and globalisation. This is because, according to Abuzaid (2024), ethical leadership can introduce innovations, creativity, and adaptive organisational culture that will overcome the challenges.

Joseph was the epitome of ethical leadership. Just as the ethical leader, in his trials, he manifested forbearance, resilience, and moral strength in the pit, the prison & palace. In a world of competition and survival of the fittest, the ethical leadership symbolised by Joseph can become relegated. In this sense, manipulative, coercive, and carrot-and-stick leadership methods become the norm. The gap and research problem is that leadership theories do not teach by example, so followers do not deliberately make up their minds to bring about change in organisations. Leadership is not only about rules and regulations, policies, and principles to follow. Ethical leadership provides the context for followers' choice in the leadership process. The main question is, what part did ethics play in the experiences of Joseph in the pit, prison, and palace? What lessons can we learn from the way Joseph treated Potiphar's wife's accusation of rape? How does his patience in prison inform our current fast-paced lives? As governor in Egypt, how does his forgiveness of his brothers reveal his attitude toward them when they threw him into a pit? Therefore, the objectives of the study include investigating Joseph in the pit, the prison,

and the palace, and the roles ethical leadership played in these contexts. The significance of this investigation is to demonstrate, through ethical leadership and the life of Joseph, that it is possible to maintain integrity, humility, and dependence on God in the face of near-death adversity.

Character change is best when it is deliberate, intentional, and a matter of free will. This is what ethical leadership, as experienced by Joseph, contributes to this study.

Ethical leadership in an organisation or a nation provides principles that guide leaders in successfully overcoming challenges. These values are not charismatic; instead, the principles consist of openness, equity, accountability, and responsibility (Ughulu, 2004). They make employees and national citizens free, encourage them to choose right over wrong, and help them become creative and innovative. The life of Joseph was filled with crucibles that revealed ethical principles of integrity, chastity, forgiveness, compassion, discernment, and self-discipline. According to Ahmad et al. (2023), ethical leadership builds a person's psychological resilience, increasing tolerance, endurance, perseverance, faith, and hope. As a teenager, Joseph learnt these lessons in a pit, prison, and palace.

The above thematic variables are three milestones in his life. In Genesis 37:24, his brothers cast him into a pit. They then sold him to the Midianites (verse 28). The Midianites sold him to Potiphar in Egypt (Verse 36). His prison experience was caused by Potiphar's lust for him. (Genesis 39:7). He refused to sleep with her and was thrown into prison for it (Genesis 39:11-20). Joseph providentially made it to the palace of Egypt, and he took the opportunity to preserve prosperity and save the lives of his brothers (Genesis 45:7). He saw the privilege of vengeance as an avenue for blessings, protection, and provision for his enemies.

Literature Search and Bible Bases for Study

In a world of spiritual diversity, leadership scholarships are gaining relevance in the field of ethical leadership. Northouse (2016) and Brown et al. (2005) argue that this shift is based on principles of integrity, equity, honesty, mutual respect, and responsibility. These principles guide reasonable decision-making processes, which Jamali et al. (2023) described as integrity and perseverance that lead to leadership efficiency and effectiveness. Drawing on moral principles, Jamali et al. (2023) cite Joseph's experience as a standard example of virtue and ethics in leadership. Even in adverse situations, he remained resolute in his moral character, with a sense of accountability and responsibility for others' welfare. Joseph was fully aware of his travails, but he surrendered to God's will for his life. Thus, as a matter of personal choice, he maintained openness and heavenly mindedness throughout his leadership Journey. By God's grace, this decision made the air around him graciously infectious. His presence in Potiphar's house brought prosperity to his home. Joseph was the source of God's blessings because the Lord was with him. In the pit, he risked being killed, but he was sold off to die as a slave. In the prison, where he was kept as an alleged rapist, the Lord also showed him mercy. The prison warden committed the affairs of the prison to him. As a prince in the Egyptian palace, God granted him the grace to manage the

national food supply, such that the entire world came to buy food from Egypt's storehouse.

In the pit, Joseph was left there to die. They agreed not to kill him by themselves. Their hatred for him stemmed from resentment. As a young man, his ethics have been fanned into a flame. Avolio & Gardier (2005) reasoned that suffering, and painful experiences teach those with discernment transformational lessons that can only be learned in this school of life. They establish moral values in leaders, which was the case with Joseph. His experience in the pit and being sold as a slave were necessary early experiences in the formation of values and competence for ethical leadership. Hence, he remained resilient in his moral standards, which served as guiding mileposts throughout his prison life. (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

The lead-up to his prison experience was due to a negative reaction to his master's wife because of his fidelity and faithfulness. Though he was pressured, he refused to have an affair with Potiphar's wife. In Potiphar's house, Joseph did not hold an office, but his power was reverent. (Indrayanti, 2025) (Maphanya 2024), he was given responsibility for the entire household based on his trustworthiness and competence. Northouse (2016) emphasised that a person of ethical character can exert significant influence without formal authority or position. Joseph was such a young man. Hence, in prison, though accused of rape, he became the leader of the prison. He had enough rest and peace of mind to receive spiritual discernment and thereby interpreted the dreams of the baker and the cupbearer of Pharaoh. This is ethical leadership, which depends on personal moral values rather than position and power (Jamali et al., 2023). In the study of Brown et al. (2005), they asserted that ethical leadership creates an atmosphere of cooperation and trust. To this extent, the baker and the butler trusted him enough to confide in him on their dreams, which belatedly led to his palace experience.

Probably, when Joseph woke up from his prison cell, he was his normal self. But unknown to him, his lot was going to change for good and forever. Pharaoh had a dream about lean seven Kine swallowing seven fat ones, and seven thin ears of corn swallowed seven good ones. Inquiries were made about who would interpret the dream, but the butler remembered Joseph. Pharaoh calls for Joseph, who comes and interprets the dream as seven years of plenty and seven years of famine. He advised on food security by storing large quantities of grain during the productive years to sell to the people during the lean years. Joseph appointed him the prime minister of Egypt. In such a great position of power, Joseph did not recognise it as one for manipulation, intimidation, and retaliation. He remained ethical and sold food to the people with transparency, integrity and fairness. To the extent that when his brothers came to buy food, he showed them mercy and preserved their lives. In all of these, Joseph was responsible, visionary and mission-oriented (Uroko, 2018).

Methodology

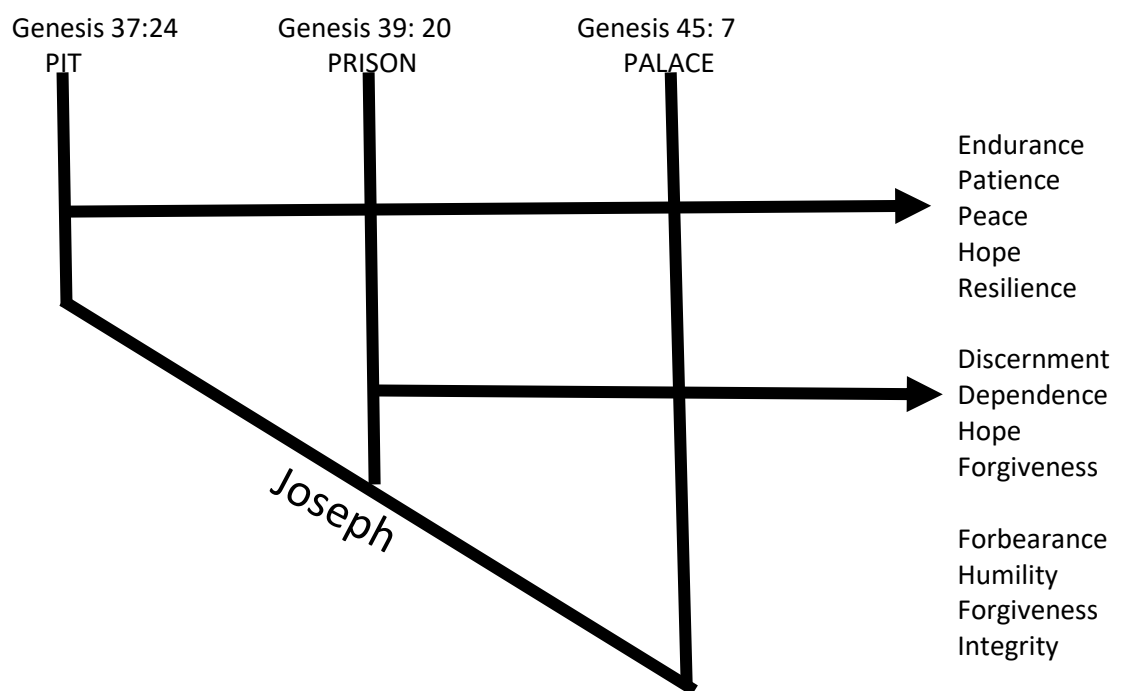
The methodology of this study is qualitative content synthesis (Haan, 2025). The design focuses on the Bible narrative of Joseph from Genesis 37-45. This narrative relied on ethical leadership to derive textual data

from the Bible for synthesis. The primary sources of the qualitative data are the relevant Bible chapters covering the life of Joseph in this study. The secondary dataset was sourced from empirical Bible scholarship and theoretical literature review. The textual dataset was collated and thematically coded (Kaur, 2025, & Zairul, 2025). The codes were converted to themes, from which research findings were derived. Ahmed et al. (2025) highlight the six steps outlined by Brain and Clarke for thematic coding. They have been summarized as data familiarisation, collating the first sets of codes, converting the initial codes into categories, identifying themes, connecting the patterns to the study's conceptual framework, and constructing the textual coding table (Pearson, 2025).

Diagrammatic Presentation of the Conceptual Framework

The entire life of Joseph was encapsulated in his experiences in the pit, prison, and palace. He had different experiences in each case. However, he learned ethical lessons that helped him overcome each adversity. In each case, he came out better than his persecutors.

Figure 1: The Conceptual Framework



From the pit to the palace, Joseph manifested ethical leadership. In the pit, he revealed principles such as endurance, patience, peace, hope, and resilience. In prison, he presented the following ethical values: discernment, dependence, hope, and forgiveness. Finally, his palace experience showed that he was forbearing, humble, forgiving, and principled.

Textual data collation, coding, and thematic content analysis.

The textual data include all moral values identified from the Bible and the literature review. They include, but not limited to endurance, patience, peace, hope, resilience, discernment, dependence, forgiveness,

forbearance, humility, integrity, tolerance, perseverance, faith, openness, equity, accountability, responsibility, innovation, creativity, charity, compassion, self-discipline, protection, provision, honesty, mutual respect, efficiency, effectiveness, empathy, fidelity, faithfulness, reverence, trustworthiness, competence, influence, cooperation, rest, peace, fairness, mercy, preservation, visionary, and mission-oriented.

The coding was conducted using Braun and Clarke's thematic coding. Data familiarization, the primary and secondary sources of textual data were studied to identify and list the moral values above.

Table 1: Bible sources, codes and ethical leadership implications of Joseph's experiences in the Pit, Prison and Palace.

Bible sources	Ethical Leadership Implications	Codes
Genesis 37:24	Under suffering and pain, the leader should endure and continue	Resilience, Endurance
Genesis 37:26	Every decision of a leader has a responsibility	Responsibility
Genesis 37:28	Perseverance preserves a leader's future	Perseverance
Genesis 38:7	Integrity makes a leader accountable and honest.	Integrity
Genesis 38:11-20	Even in secret, a leader must be true	Charity and responsibility
Genesis 40:12-13	A leader must remain optimistic and expectant	Hope
Genesis 41:1-7	He should solve problems in a novel way	Innovation and Creativity
Genesis 41:9-14	A leader must explain every action	Accountability
Genesis 41:29-32	A leader should see the future more clearly than others.	Discernment, Foresight
Genesis 41:38-41	A leader must be good in his work and impact others	Competence, Influence
Genesis 41:57	A leader must provide for the follower's needs	Provision
Genesis 45:7	A leader should preserve the lives of others, to enable assigned tasks.	Preservation, mission-oriented

Bible texts that specify the experiences of Joseph are coded into textual data, with the explanatory ethical leadership implications for each of them. From Table 1, codes were converted into categories.

Table 2: Codes and categories of Joseph's experiences in the Pit, Prison and Palace.

Codes	Categories
Endurance, resilience, perseverance,	Adversity
Integrity, charity, honesty, responsibilities	Ethical conduct
Faith, hope, discernment, foresight	Spiritual insight.
Creativity, innovation, effectiveness	Strategic leadership
Competence, influence, accountability	Leadership authority
Provision, Mission- oriented	Societal welfare
Preservation	Purposeful leadership

Identify themes:

The codes are combined to form themes, which are developed into patterns. The codes converted into categories illustrate Joseph's transition from the pit to the palace. This shows his ethical leadership growth from adversity, which requires endurance, resilience, and perseverance. The journey to the prison is identified in the categories of ethical conduct and spiritual insight. In these categories, he needed evidence of integrity, honesty, responsibility, faith, hope, and discernment and foresight. In the powerful position of prime minister of Egypt, Joseph was equipped with strategies, authority, concern for societal welfare, and purposefulness. He ethically attains these goals through creativity, innovation, competence, influence, accountability, provision, mission-oriented and preservation of his brothers' lives and those of the Egyptians.

Connect the theme to the study's conceptual framework.

The conceptual framework has three stages: pit, prison, and palace. When the themes are linked to the conceptual framework, they illustrate which themes are identified with which stage of the framework.

Table 3: Combination of the conceptual framework, categories, and ethical leadership of Joseph's experiences in the Pit, Prison and Palace.

Conceptual framework	Categories	Ethical meaning
Pit	Adversity	Initial leadership formation stage undersuffering and hardship.
Prison	Ethical conduct, Spiritual insight	Leadership development, strength, to show integrity, charity honesty.
Palace	Strategic, authority, Purposeful leadership.	Proof of leadership competence, Influence, and mission-orientation

The combination of the conceptual framework and the categories implies that leadership is gradual and progressive. This is particularly true in ethical leadership, where Joseph moves from the pit stage (adversity) to the prison stage (ethical conduct and spiritual insight) to the palace stage (competence, influence, and mission-orientation). The best ethical leader is the one who has gone through the stages identified in this study. The final stage is the code matrix. This is a combination of all the Bible texts, codes, themes, and their ethical leadership meanings.

Table 4: Bible chapters, codes, themes and ethical leadership of Joseph's experiences in the Pit, Prison and Palace.

Bible text	Code	Theme	Ethical leadership
Genesis 37	Betrayed	Adversity	Leadership formation, learning under leadership.
Genesis 39	Refusal to fall into sin	Ethical conduct, Spiritual insights	Leadership development and practice
Genesis 40	Revelation' to tell dreams	Strategy	Ethical leadership
Genesis 41	Provision of food	Authority, Purposeful	Ethical leadership practice
Genesis 45	Brotherly forgiveness	Reconciliation	Ethical leadership humility

Thematic content analysis and discussion

Despite his brothers' betrayal, who hated him enough to throw him into a pit, Joseph remained ethical in his endurance, resistance, and perseverance (Northouse, 2016). Consequently, Joseph was able to make decisions to remain a person of integrity (Jamali et al, 2023). Though the Bible did not tell much of the response of Joseph when his brothers threw him into the pit, what we know is that he pleaded with them, but to no avail (Genesis 42:21). This means that even though he remained ethical, he suffered emotionally but remained very reverent (Indrayanti, 2025; Maphanga, 2024). Joseph's ethical leadership was not based on position or power. He found peace and rest in the pit of adversity. Hence, he lived through the experience and was even successful in prison. If he were unethical, Joseph would have missed the chance to interpret the dreams that God used to launch him to stardom. What kept him at the top of the leadership pack in Egypt was not his position and power, but the tenor of his moral character (Jamali et al., 2023).

In many leadership downturns, it is the position and power that often tip the leader over the precipice. In and of itself, the authority of any office is not evil. Instead, it is what that authority does to a person's mind that portends danger for them. This implies that no matter how high and exalted the position and power, the leader should remain humble and serve the followers (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Where this is not the case, the leader will have an intoxication stupor. Because of his ethical

principles, Joseph was not affected by his elevation to the position of prime minister of Egypt. Restraint and reverence for character are not learned at the zenith of leadership; they are learned at the lower rungs of the ladder. Joseph had been in the pit, betrayed and thrown into prison. These experiences provided deliberate lessons that were necessary for him to be divested of the effects of such a political office. Again, it is such a reverent mindset that prepared him for the grace needed to forgive his brothers for such a heinous crime against him. In short, his brothers did not believe that Joseph was alive. In their minds, he was dead and gone. Being found alive by them and worried about revenge, Joseph said that God had providentially sent him over to Egypt to preserve life and grant them a posterity. In this analysis, Joseph was a type of Jesus and Stephen. On the cross, Jesus prayed "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). On his part, Stephen asked God "...not to hold this sin against them", who were stoning him to death (Acts 7:60).

Ethical leadership transcends age, position, power, or official authority. In suffering and pain, in pleasure and pump, ethical leadership does not give up the principles of doing unto others as you would want them to do unto you (Matthew 7:12). The fact is that right in the pit, without having a vision plan of where he was heading, nor what will be his lot, Joseph placed his life and future into the hands of God. His arrival at the palace from prison was more than he could hope for. Thus, when literature refers to Joseph as visionary and mission-oriented (Uroko 2018), these traits were not his personal qualities but rather the gifts of God bestowed on him. This study does not counsel against plans and strategies; however, Joseph's experience implies that every leader will be better off if the will of God is fulfilled in his or her life and plans. On the condition that the leader remains ethically obedient to Bible principles.

Research findings

The objective of this study is to investigate the role that ethical leadership played in Joseph's experiences in the pit, prison, and palace. This goal addresses the relationship between ethical leadership and the challenging experiences of a leader. This study is qualitative. The analysis was based on thematic content synthesis of Joseph's life experiences.

These findings are presented in three sections. Each section covers the three aspects of Joseph's experience: pit, prison, and palace. In the pit, Joseph was betrayed and suffered deep adversity. He was resilient, endured, persevered, and showed responsibility in the situation. The lessons in the pit were preparatory for his next incarceration experience. When Joseph was thrown into prison, he was innocent of the charge of rape. He refused to fall into sin or to engage in counteraccusation to prove his innocence. He conducted himself ethically and manifested Spiritual insight.

As prime minister, he was already equipped with humility and forgiveness. Heretofore, he had received the spirit of telling dreams, strategy, authority, purpose, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Recommendations

Joseph suffered betrayal and adversity at the hands of his brothers. They put him in a pit and later sold him as a slave. The problem is that either he could have died in the pit or in the hands of the slave traders. A person may be worried and concerned if he or she is suspected of committing a crime. Otherwise, in situations of suffering, pain, and a possibility of death for no crime of yours, it is better to place one's life in the hands of God. The best lessons of life are always learned in the school of adversity. Every ethical leader needs to learn that getting to the top takes dangerous twists and turns. Like Joseph, the ethical response should consist of endurance, resilience, and perseverance.

For the ethical leader, troubles never end. Joseph was framed for attempted rape. Then, without a defence for himself, he was thrown into prison. The implication here is real. He was forgotten in prison to live and die there. The solution was divine. At the human level, in one's innocence, enemies plan to destroy someone. When they block all avenues of escape, they are inadvertently inviting God to come to the aid of the innocent victim. Patient, ethical conduct, and spiritual insight are instructive.

Joseph forgave his brothers when he had the opportunity to provide for their upkeep and preserve their lives. As a prime minister, he could have avenged himself on his brothers. He did not. The best ethical practise has been exemplified by Joseph's approach: strike back at his enemies, deal with them kindly, and provide for their needs; hence, grant them the privilege to reconsider their ways if they choose to.

Conclusions

The main objective of this study is to investigate the life of Joseph in the pit, prison and palace and the role of ethical leadership in the experiences. Joseph was betrayed in his innocence and thrown into an empty pit. This brought out of him the innate strength of endurance, resilience, and perseverance. While he was undergoing the adversity, he did not bear ill feelings toward his persecutors but believed that everything would turn out well for him. Though he did not know how or when, he believed that God would surely come through for him.

His release from the pit and being sold into slavery was not one of movement from pain to freedom. However, he was still alive, and the scene changed. The accusation of attempted rape was a dangerous variant of his ordeal. But he had learnt to depend on God in every situation. The wife of Potiphar's allegation was divinely allowed as a stepping stone into the palace of Egypt as a prime minister. The major key to this providence was that Joseph refused to take the bait. Had he swallowed the hook, he would have been only a massive fish in the frying pan of Potiphar's household. However, his sin would have found him out. He may not have ended up in prison, but in the grave.

Leadership literature may have to shift away from the organization, the leader, and the followers. The attention advanced in this study is the providential nucleus of the God factor. The implication is that no matter how brilliant and charismatic a leader may be, if God is not in the equation of his leadership, the process will malfunction and the outcomes will not be tangible in real terms. In other words, Bible principles and ethics can inform leadership development in the line of moral values.

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