

GENESIS

In the beginning God...

Spoiling Gone Bad or The Ultimate Test? The Story of Joseph – Part 1

At this time Jacob and his family were dwelling near Isaac in Hebron. The narrative picks up again after the genealogy of Esau within two years after the family arrived in Hebron. Joseph was 17 years old at this time; he had been about 15 at the time of his mother's death shortly before they reached Hebron.

Chapter 37

V1 *Jacob lived in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan.* (ESV)

V2a *These are the generations of Jacob.* (ESV)

This final "toldot" or "generations," now for Jacob, introduces us to the final segment of the Book of Genesis, the story of Joseph. Although Jacob had trusted for many years in God's promise that he would inherit the land, the same as God promised Abraham and Isaac, he, like they, continued to live as a foreigner in the land of Canaan. (*And Jacob dwelt in the land wherein his father was a stranger, in the land of Canaan.* V1 KJV) They did not yet own the land, only scattered small portions that they had purchased.

V2b *Joseph, being seventeen years old, was pasturing the flock with his brothers. He was a boy with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives. And Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father.* (ESV)

V3 *Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors.* (ESV)

V4 *But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.* (ESV)

Here we begin the actual story of Joseph, a story that is very different and in great contrast to that of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God never appeared to him, nor were the covenant promises given to him. As we know of the sons of Jacob it was Judah, not Joseph, through whom God would fulfill the coming of the Messiah.

Joseph's oldest brothers (Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah) were mature men by this time and apparently had duties in the family which kept them generally away from Joseph. Leah's other two, younger sons, Issachar and Zebulun, were either with their older brothers or with their mother. Joseph apparently stayed more with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah (Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher), who were closer to his own age. Perhaps all five were still in process of learning how to be a shepherd. Benjamin was still quite young, and was more than likely home with Jacob.

It appears that Joseph was somewhat spoiled by his father, since he was born in his old age and also was the firstborn son of his beloved and favorite wife Rachel. Some scholars believe that since the phrase in Hebrew “*pasturing the flock*” implies leading or ruling over the flock that he may have been the lead shepherd. Perhaps another indicator of his authority (or favoritism) was the special “*robe of many colors*” which his father made for him. The word translated here as “colors” is highly debated however most Hebrew scholars today believe the phrase “*ketonet passim*” actually means “long coat (or robe) with long sleeves.” The tradition of many colors can be traced back to the Septuagint, which reads “a multicolored frock.” In any case, it seems clear that the intent of this special garment was a symbol of his authority and favored position in the family (at least in the minds of his brothers!) Plus to make matter worse between Joseph and his brothers he snitched on them to their father. It appears the situation was so bad that Joseph’s brothers couldn’t even be civil to him.

V5 *Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more.* (ESV)

V6 *He said to them, “Hear this dream that I have dreamed:* (ESV)

V7 *Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf.”* (ESV)

V8 *His brothers said to him, “Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?” So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.* (ESV)

Joseph had a remarkable dream; Scripture does not say whether this dream came from the Lord, although due to its later fulfillment it obviously is. Undoubtedly by now Joseph started to feel his brother’s resentment and was now trying to gain their respect or appreciation, so he tells them about his dream. However, the results, as one might predict, only made the situation worse. The dream had to do with a field of corn, in which he and his brothers were going about the work of binding the corn into sheaves. The sheaf, which he had bound suddenly, rose and stood up, while the sheaves, which his brothers had bound, surrounded Joseph’s sheaf and bowed down to it. The meaning, at least as Joseph understood it, was quite obvious, and his brothers fiercely resented it.

V9 *Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, “Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.”* (ESV)

V10 *But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, “What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?”* (ESV)

V11 *And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind.* (ESV)

Joseph had another dream, this time it was not only his brothers, but also his mother and father, who were bowing down to him. Though his mother was dead, she was represented in his dream in this way, or perhaps he could have interpreted the moon in his dream to represent Leah. Either way, he understood that he was to be preeminent over his entire family. This time even his father rebuked him. Jacob, who had known the Lord more intimately than anyone of his generation, had difficulty believing that this dream was anything but the product of Joseph's egocentric subconscious.

Almost the same symbols appeared in the visions of the apostle John (See Revelation 12:1), again representing Israel and the 12 tribes (notice that it is Jacob who interprets the dream). Though Jacob had felt he should rebuke Joseph for dreaming such things and for interpreting them as prophetic of his own future preeminence, he wondered in his heart whether Joseph might be right after all. He had himself observed and acknowledged that Joseph by his actions was more promising than his brothers. As far as his brothers were concerned, they now not only hated but also envied him.

V12 *Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. (ESV)*

V13 *And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." And he said to him, "Here I am." (ESV)*

V14 *So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock, and bring me word." So he sent him from the Valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem. (ESV)*

An unusual, perhaps one might say even strange, development took place at this time. Jacob and his sons were living at Hebron, at least 50 miles south of their old home in Shechem. Presumably there was adequate pasture around Hebron, especially since Esau had moved away. For some reason the older brothers decided to take the flocks back up to Shechem to feed. Perhaps they were reacting in anger against Joseph and Jacob's apparent favoritism. All sons, except Joseph and Benjamin, had apparently gone to Shechem with the flocks. Finally, Jacob became so concerned about them that he decided to send Joseph to see how they were. He knew he could depend on Joseph for a reliable and truthful investigation and report. Jacob's decision to send Joseph was put in the form of a request, rather than a command. Joseph was quite willing to go.

V15 *And a man found him wandering in the fields. And the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" (ESV)*

V16 *"I am seeking my brothers," he said. "Tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." (ESV)*

V17 *And the man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan. (ESV)*

Joseph no doubt made better time to Hebron than his brothers had done, since herding flocks did not encumber him. However, it would have taken him at least two days to traverse the 50 miles.

When he arrived in Shechem, he was dismayed to find they were not there. He roamed around the area, trying to find some clue as to what might have happened to them; but Shechem was apparently still in ruins and no one seemed to be around.

He finally met a man who could give him the information he desired. The man had overheard them saying they planned to go on northward to Dothan. What the occasion of this decision may have been we are not told. Dothan was about 20 miles north of Shechem; so it took Joseph at least another day to reach there. The word “Dothan” is believed to mean “two cisterns” and was presumably so named because of two storage wells there. Dothan was on an east-west trade route and near the main north-south trade route known as the Via Maris that provided easy passage to Egypt.

V18 *They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him.* (ESV)

V19 *They said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer.* (ESV)

V20 *Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams.”* (ESV)

V21 *But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.”* (ESV)

V22 *And Reuben said to them, “Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him”—that he might rescue him out of their hand to restore him to his father.* (ESV)

As they saw Joseph coming, they said sarcastically to each other look “*here comes the dreamer!*” (NLT) The Hebrew word for “*dreamer*” implies one who is a master at dreaming; perhaps suggesting that he is good for nothing else. Now, here he was, giving them the perfect opportunity to get rid of him. They could slay him, throw him into one of the empty cisterns, and then report back to their father that a wild animal had killed him. That would be the end of his dreams! (See Acts 7:9)

Apparently the younger brothers hatched this plan, since neither Reuben nor Judah would go along with it. Reuben, of all the brothers, would seem to have the most cause to resent Joseph, since Jacob apparently intended to give Joseph the birthright ahead of him, the oldest son. His defense of Joseph is therefore, the more commendable. It almost sounds like he intended, if possible, to help Joseph escape back to his father, he persuaded his brothers not to slay him, but to catch him and throw him into the pit alive. Perhaps letting him die of thirst rather than shedding of human blood (See Genesis 9:6). Joseph evidently realized that Reuben was really trying to save him, since years later; he held Simeon (the next oldest), rather than Reuben, captive in his prison (See Genesis 42:24).

V23 *So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore.* (ESV)

- V24** *And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.* (ESV)
- V25** *Then they sat down to eat. And looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt.* (ESV)
- V26** *Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood?”* (ESV)
- V27** *Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers listened to him.* (ESV)
- V28** *Then Midianite traders passed by. And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt.* (ESV)

Having decided what they were going to do, the brothers grabbed Joseph as soon as he came near. The first thing they did was to strip off the resented coat, and then they threw him, probably violently, down into the dry well. It was mealtime; so they sat down to eat while discussing what to do with him. In the meantime Reuben apparently left them possibly distressed at the whole situation and not wanting to argue with them further. Perhaps he was intending, after they had left the locality, to come back by himself and free Joseph. Or he might have gone to take care of the flocks, since the others seem to be preoccupied with Joseph.

As they were eating, they saw a caravan approach. The men in the caravan are called both Ishmaelites (verse 25) and Midianites (verse 28). This is not a contradiction; both Ishmael (Hagar) and Midian (Keturah) were sons of Abraham (See Genesis 16:15; 25:2), and their respective descendants were often together. The two names were often used interchangeably (See one example in Judges 8:24 and 26). Quite likely both groups were present in this caravan.

With Reuben gone, and most of the brothers still arguing that they should at least abandon Joseph to die in the pit even if they didn't actually shed his blood. Judah felt it was now his responsibility to save his life. Seeing the Ishmaelites, however, gave Judah an idea. Why not sell Joseph to them as a slave, whom they in turn could sell in Egypt? That way Joseph would no longer influence their lives and no one would be guilty of murder.

When the Midianites reached them, they hailed them and told them their proposition. They settled on a price of 20 pieces of silver. All this time, Joseph had been pleading with his brothers in “*distress of his soul*” (See Genesis 42:21) from the bottom of the pit. Joseph was drawn up out of the pit, delivered over to the Midianites and then carried by them down into Egypt. The price paid for Joseph was later stated in the Torah as the price of dedication for a young man or boy (See Leviticus 27:5).

- V29** *When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes* (ESV)
- V30** *and returned to his brothers and said, “The boy is gone, and I, where shall I go?”* (ESV)
- V31** *Then they took Joseph’s robe and slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood.* (ESV)
- V32** *And they sent the robe of many colors and brought it to their father and said, “This we have found; please identify whether it is your son’s robe or not.”* (ESV)
- V33** *And he identified it and said, “It is my son’s robe. A fierce animal has devoured him. Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.”* (ESV)

After everyone else was gone Reuben came back, probably to free Joseph. To his surprise and dismay, Joseph was not there. He tore his clothes, a conventional way of expressing grief. He then rushed to catch up with his brothers to tell them about Joseph’s disappearance, only to find out what they had done with him. He realized he would be held responsible by his father, and was confused and disturbed over what he should do. They settled on a convenient lie. They would lead their father to think Joseph had been slain by a wild beast, as they had originally planned. They would not overtly tell a lie, however, they would simply let their father deduce this from the evidence. They dipped Joseph’s coat in the blood of a slain kid of the goats, and then brought it to their father when they returned home, saying they simply “found it.”

- V34** *Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days.* (ESV)
- V35** *All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, “No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.” Thus his father wept for him.* (ESV)
- V36** *Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard.* (ESV)

Jacob was so grief-stricken that he tore his clothing, donned sackcloth, and went into a period of great mourning. Jacob continued mourning for so many days that finally his sons became seriously concerned and tried to “comfort” him. His daughters also tried to comfort him. This is the first mention of any daughters besides Dinah (they are also mentioned in Genesis 46:7 and 15) so that he must have had at least one other daughter by this time. No one could comfort him, so great was his loss. He said that he would continue to mourn until he actually died and went to his son in *Sheol* (most often translated “the grave.” but really referring to the place of departed spirits).

In the meantime, the caravan arrived in Egypt. They sold Joseph to a prominent Egyptian official named Potiphar, the “*captain of the guard*” or more literally, the “chief of executioners” for Pharaoh, the king of Egypt.