

Genesis 37:1-17

Joseph the Dreamer

If two weeks ago it seemed as if we were running downhill, as we raced through the first thirty-five chapters of Genesis in review, last week probably seemed as if we were slogging through a vat of peanut butter as we tackled the intricate and detailed genealogy of Esau's descendants and the inhabitants of the land of Seir. Perhaps this week, as we return to a more typical narrative in Genesis, we will find a more comfortable and familiar pace.

Introduction and Overview

These remaining chapters of Genesis, which tell the history of Joseph, actually fall under the *tōlēdōt* of Jacob. That is, the son's story is subsumed into that of his father. We see this demonstrated not only in the introduction to this passage, but also in the fact that the narrative of the patriarchs concludes with the deaths of Jacob and Joseph recorded closely together in chapter 50. Also, as we will see, while Joseph is the main character in the chapters that follow, Jacob is active in many of the episodes.

Another character who plays an increasing role in these histories is Judah. He will give the longest recorded speech in this narrative (Genesis 44:18-34), his views will take precedence over those of his older brother Reuben in convincing the other brothers to sell Joseph rather than kill him (Genesis 37:26-27), and he will be the one who convinces Jacob to let Benjamin return with the brothers to Egypt (Genesis 43:8-11). So while the focus of the remaining chapters is on Joseph, he does not act alone, and his history is quite naturally interrelated with the rest of his family.

The Joseph narrative continues many of the same themes that were paramount in the narratives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The promises of land, seed, and blessing which God gave to Abraham and renewed to Isaac and Jacob are present and most important. Yet while the devastating famine that grips the land and forms the context of, and the motivation for, the migration of the Hebrews into Egypt seems to pose the greatest threat to the fulfillment of these promises, in fact the relative silence of God and the continuing moral decline of the brothers prove potentially more troublesome.

There are other similarities and differences when the Joseph narrative is looked at alongside the other patriarchal histories. One common theme will be that of sibling rivalry and deception. The family tensions that we first saw with Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, and then repeated in the dynamic between Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Esau, seem only to be exaggerated with the twelve sons of Jacob who reduce themselves to contemplating fratricide. A noteworthy difference between this narrative and that of the earlier patriarchs is that here God relies on symbolic dreams rather than divine theophany to outline His plans for the future. That is, the dreams of Joseph are not direct revelations, but require interpretation and are potentially ambiguous. That, too, forms part of the drama.

In terms of how the biblical character of Joseph has been viewed throughout history, we can see that early Jewish writers saw him in very positive terms. He was seen as being innocent of any wrongdoing in his interactions with his brothers, as maintaining his sexual purity despite temptation, and as saving the Egyptian people from famine through his administrative skills. Later Jewish writers did comment on his

testing of his brothers in a much more negative light, however. Early Christian writers saw Joseph as a type of Christ and found many points of allegorical connection, from the fact that Joseph is stripped of his robe (as Christ would be) to the forgiveness of his brothers (as Christ forgives sinners). The Reformers, such as Luther, saw in Joseph's descent into and return from prison a type of resurrection.

But as with the other patriarchs, the biblical Joseph is more complicated. To be sure, he does resist temptation and eventually forgives his brothers for their actions against him. He also is seen by Pharaoh as a man of God, "then Pharaoh said to his servants, 'can we find a man like this, in whom there is a divine spirit?'" (Genesis 41:38). Yet he seems arrogant in his youth and seems to take pleasure in terrifying his brothers when they come to Egypt. Indeed, when we first meet him he seems a spoiled adolescent who tattles on his older brothers and brags about his future role as leader of the family.

A Favorite Son

"Jacob lived in the land where his father had lived as a stranger, in the land of Canaan" (v. 1). The land where Jacob lived is defined in two complementary ways. First, it is "the land where his father had lived as a stranger" (v. 1). Then it is called simply "the land of Canaan (v. 1). We are reminded that the patriarchs had lived in Canaan as sojourners, as pastoral wanderers, aliens never owning much more than a burial cave (Genesis 23:3-15) or a small place of land on which to build an altar (Genesis 33:19-20).

It seems that Jacob, though, has settled there on a more permanent basis. The family settlement referred to is likely in Hebron, where we last left him at the death of his father (Genesis 35:27). It is not unrealistic to imagine that after all his years of self-imposed exile, family squabbles, and struggles with God and man, Jacob was hoping for a restful time in his later years. His family line was secure, after all he had twelve sons, and he was prospering. If he thought that, however, he was mistaken.

But before we pick apart the narrative that is to follow, let us make a few more general comments. First, we will see in this passage the daily strife that would eventually lead to Joseph being sold into slavery. We also see the accounts of two dreams which foreshadow Joseph's ascent over his brothers. These two plot lines weave together and, in fact, God will use the former to bring about the latter. And we must note at the beginning that in this passage that none of the characters comes out looking good. Jacob shows favoritism that is unbecoming to a parent. One might think he would have learned the ill effects of such parenting from his own upbringing, but clearly he did not. And Joseph is very full of himself and lacks discretion. His brothers are plainly and simply jealous, ungracious, and vengeful.

This passage also provides a chronological anchor for the remainder of the Joseph narrative. We are informed that this account begins when Joseph "was seventeen years of age" which, in that culture, meant that "he was still a youth" (v. 2). He has not been mentioned in Scripture since his birth, except in a brief genealogy (Genesis 35:24), and so we know little of his earlier years. We first meet him when he is "pasturing the flock with his brothers" (v. 2). That is, Joseph was helping as a field hand serving in the family business. He was working "along with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives" (v. 2). The mention of these two women reminds us of the rivalry between Rachel and Leah and the tension among their respective sons.

But there is no reason to suppose that Joseph may have been with these brothers, rather than the sons of Rachel and Leah, because these sons were seen as illegitimate and thus were given less important tasks than the sons of Rachel and Leah. Such thinking is a modern sensibility. In that culture and at that time Bilhah and Zilpah were clearly, as Scripture describes them, “his father’s wives” (v. 2). Indeed, there is no reason to think that Joseph was isolated from the other brothers. As we will see, the narrative makes it clear that all of the brothers shared the same negative feelings toward Joseph.

So Jacob had been out with Dan and Naphtali (Bilhah’s sons) and Gad and Asher (Zilpah’s sons) tending the flocks and herds when he returned to the family settlement at Hebron and “brought back a bad report about them to their father” (v. 2). He told his father something uncomplimentary about his siblings. Scripture does not relate the specific content of this bad report, nor do we know if Jacob had requested such a report. That is, we do not know if Joseph was being a dutiful son and following obediently the instructions of his father to keep him informed as to the actions of his other sons, or if he was merely being a tattletale.

But it is clear that this was a very negative account. The word translated “bad report” is *dibbā*, a word that refers to the whispering of a hostile person. Consider,

David moaned,

“For I have heard the slander of many,
Terror is on every side;
While they took counsel together against me,
They schemed to take away my life” (Psalm 31:13).

Jeremiah complained,

“For I have heard the whispering of many,
‘Terror on every side!
Denounce him; let’s denounce him!’
All my trusted friends,
Watching for my fall, say:
‘Perhaps he will be persuaded, so that we may prevail against him
And take our revenge on him’” (Jeremiah 20:10)

And Solomon pointed out,

“One who conceals hatred has lying lips,
And one who spreads slander is a fool” (Proverbs 10:18).

So Joseph’s report was no little thing. He clearly put the worst possible face on whatever actions his brothers had been doing.

We can assume that Jacob heard this report at face value. After all, Joseph was his favorite son. “Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his other sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a multicolored tunic” (v. 3). We need not make too much of the fact that Scripture refers to Jacob as Israel here. Those names are interchangeable, though the usual pattern is for the name Jacob to be used when

his human failings are most apparent. More importantly, the point may be to remind the reader that Jacob received his new name after a time of betrayal and struggle. This is a wonderful foreshadowing of the same events in the life of Joseph.

That Joseph is described as “the son of his old age” (v. 3) seems curious though. After all, Benjamin was born even later in Jacob’s life. The reference seems to serve more as a reminder of Jacob’s fondness for Rachel. In fact, Joseph was the eleventh son born to Jacob. Still, Jacob was the last son born to Jacob that was a happy event, since his beloved Rachel died during the birth of Benjamin. Jacob’s love for Rachel is no doubt why he favored Joseph.

Jacob’s love for Joseph also reminds the reader of that doting love that Rebekah had for Jacob. Jacob seems unashamed of his attention to Joseph. He does nothing, it seems, to try to hide his affections. He makes no excuses. Rather, Jacob ostentatiously “made him a multicolored tunic” (v. 3). This was a *kētōnet*, an undergarment that was worn next to the skin by either a man or a woman. It could flow as low as the ankles and was long sleeved. Probably made of wool, for the family pastured sheep, the description of it being multicolored may also refer to embroidery. Furthermore, the fact that Jacob could produce such a garment is further testimony to his household skills acquired at the hands of his mother.

In the historical record, we have many cases of Near-Eastern cultures using such decorations to draw attention to and honor others. In Ugaritic texts such a robe has been mentioned in the context of signifying social or political status. In Akkadian texts such a garment was draped over statues of gods and goddesses and was accompanied with gold and silver ornaments and precious stones. Clay figurines from ancient Ur show human figures with long robes that had been painted. The Beni-Hasan tomb in Egypt, which dates from the 18th century BC (and thus is contemporary with Joseph, who lived in the 19th century BC) depicts thirty-seven Semites, all dressed in brightly colored robes, migrating into Egypt. A fresco in the Zimri-lim palace in ancient Mari (also 18th century BC) shows a garment made of many small rectangular panels that were woven together. All of this to say that Joseph’s extraordinary coat fits into a type of clothing that denoted special favor or influence and significance and is attested to quite clearly in the historical record.

This favoritism did not go unnoticed by the rest of the family. Joseph’s “brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers; and so they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms” (v. 4). Since Joseph was seventeen, most of these older brothers were in their twenties or thirties. Jacob’s favoring Joseph had been witnessed by them for many years, no doubt. Yet it is interesting that the brothers focused their resentment on Joseph. After all, it was their father who was showing favoritism. And the young men had no difficulty in speaking up to their father. Remember their response to Jacob’s rebuke of them after the slaughter of the men of Shechem, “should he treat our sister like a prostitute?” (Genesis 34:31).

So perhaps the brothers did express their frustrations to their father as well. One can only imagine the atmosphere of Jacob’s household as the men bickered and fought. Even common civility had fled the tents of Jacob.

Joseph's First Dream

The narrative of Jacob's first dream is bookended by the statement that his brothers "hated him even more" (v. 5, 8). These feelings were brought about because Jacob was not only favored by their father, but now seems intent on announcing that he was favored by God as well. And we must remember that in this culture a dream or vision was seen as a portent from God. Nevertheless, both his compulsion to share the dream, as well as its contents, only increased the animosity his brothers felt toward him. Their negative feelings toward their privileged brother were made greater by the fact that he seemed to revel in his superiority within the family.

We do not know what compelled Joseph to relate his dream to his brothers. Certainly he must have known it would not be well received. He was no child, remember, and he must have been aware of his brothers' feelings toward him. Perhaps he simply enjoyed reminding his brothers that he was the favored one. In any case, Joseph recounted his dream.

“⁶He said to them, ‘please listen to this dream which I have had; ⁷for behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf stood up and also remained standing; and behold, your sheaves gathered around and bowed down to my sheaf’” (v. 6-7).

Scripture does not state that he shared his dream with the intent of annoying his brothers. It may be just his adolescent excitement and enthusiasm at an exciting destiny being foretold. Notice also that Joseph is the narrator, not the commentator of his dream. He did not attempt to interpret it or analyze its meaning. Perhaps that may be because his annoyed brothers cut him short and did not give him time to finish. As we will see, it certainly seems that they understood the meaning of the dream.

This is the first dream recorded in Scripture where God does not speak. That is, this is not a theophany. Both to the patriarchs and to pagans (Abimelech, Laban), God had spoken, but not here. In the other cases, the dream had been the means God by which communicated a message, but here there is no such explicit statement. That does not mean, however, that this was simply Jacob's ego on display. As we will see with later dreams of this kind (Pharaoh's baker and cupbearer, and Pharaoh himself), God need not speak personally to make His future known.

The image of sheaves seems out of place though. After all, these were shepherds, not farmers. Yet, when we remember that Joseph will correctly interpret the “ears of grain” in Pharaoh's dream (Genesis 41:22) and that it was a famine that prompted the sons of Jacob to journey to Egypt later on, it makes sense. In fact, the dream itself would be fulfilled then, when the brothers returned with Benjamin on their second journey into Egypt,

“²⁶When Joseph came home, they brought into the house to him the gift which was in their hand, and they bowed down to the ground before him. ²⁷Then he asked them about their welfare, and said, ‘is your old father well, of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?’ ²⁸And they said, ‘your servant our father is well; he is still alive.’ Then they bowed down again in homage” (Genesis 43:26-28).

As we mentioned, the brothers clearly understood both the meaning and significance of the dream. And they were not pleased. So, they reacted as we might expect. “Then his brothers said to him, ‘are you

actually going to reign over us? Or are you really going to rule over us?' So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words" (v. 8-9). Their frustration is explained, though not excused, if we remember that in this culture, a dream carried with it the claim to being a divine decree.

Joseph's Second Dream

Some time later, Joseph "had yet another dream" (v. 9). Curiously, all of the dreams in the Joseph narrative occur in pairs. The two here, the two that Pharaoh had, and those of the baker and cupbearer that Joseph hears while in prison.

And, once again Joseph "informed his brothers of it, and said, 'behold, I have had yet another dream; and behold, the sun and the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me'" (v. 9). This did not improve relations, "his brothers were jealous of him" (v. 11). So, not having received the response he hoped for from his brothers, Joseph "also told it to his father" (v. 10). His motivation may have been that the dream referred to his father, "the sun." But this creates a problem since his mother, "the moon," had died during the birth of his brother Benjamin.

Jewish commentators have argued that the reference to "the moon" was to Rachel's servant, Bilhah, who likely had reared Joseph after his mother died (*Genesis Rabbah* 84.11). But it seems more likely that the references to "the sun" and "the moon" are meant to serve as representing the entire family. As John Calvin stated, in these terms "Joseph sees himself revered by the whole house of his father" (*Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:262).

Like Joseph's brothers, his father both clearly understood the meaning of the dream and was equally unimpressed. "His father rebuked him and said to him, 'what is this dream that you have had? Am I and your mother and your brothers actually going to come to bow down to the ground before you?'" (v. 10). Curious that Jacob responds with the statement, "am I and your mother" (v. 10), since Rachel had died. Perhaps Jacob is referring to Leah, or Rachel's servant, Bilhah. This dream must also have reminded Jacob that, relatively recently, he had bowed before his brother (Genesis 33:3). Having traded for the birthright and stolen the family blessing, it seemed as if Jacob still found himself in submission.

Yet, despite this stinging rebuke, Jacob was familiar with how God worked. Jacob had wrestled with God and had his own share of visions, so he "kept the matter in mind" (v. 11). The immediate parallel is that of Mary, who upon hearing the revelation of the shepherds at the birth of her son "treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). Thus we have three reasons for the anger of Joseph's brothers against him. First, he had maligned them to their father. Second, he had been favored by Jacob, and third, he flaunted his future superiority.

Joseph Searches for his Brothers

As the scene shifts to the fields we cannot overlook some curious elements of this passage. First, Joseph's "brothers went to pasture their father's flock in Shechem" (v.12). Shechem had been the scene of the rape of Dinah and the massacre of the male population by her brothers. Had so much time passed that the two groups had reconciled? That seems unlikely considering the severity of the events. Perhaps the local

environment around Hebron had become so parched that the brothers had to travel that distance to find pastures for their flocks.

This also may be a clue as to why Jacob sends Joseph to check up on his brothers. Jacob may have been concerned for their welfare, taking the flocks so near an enemy and so far from the family settlement that they would be easy prey if attacked. Remembering that his sons had taken “²⁸their flocks, their herds, and their donkeys, and that which was in the city and that which was in the field; ²⁹and they captured and looted all their wealth and all their little ones and their wives, even everything that was in the houses” (Genesis 34:28-29), Jacob must have considered that the men of Shechem might seek to get even.

A related question is why the brothers had traveled so far. The distance from Hebron, where the family had settled, to Shechem is about fifty miles. Dothan, where Jacob eventually found his brothers, is another thirteen miles beyond that. That is an extraordinary distance to travel to find good pastures. Though no mention is made in Scripture of a drought or famine at this time, such an event provides a plausible explanation. And clearly Jacob is aware that the brothers have traveled a considerable distance since he sent Joseph to find out their progress. Had they been able to return home regularly, no such trip would have been necessary.

A further point to consider is why Jacob sent Joseph, instead of any number of servants who must have been available, to check on the progress of the brothers. “Israel said to Joseph, ‘are your brothers not pasturing the flock in Shechem? Come, and I will send you to them’” (v. 13). Jacob must have been aware of the hostility of his other sons toward Joseph, though perhaps he did not fully appreciate how angry they were with him. After all, open hostility to a favored son would not have been a good idea.

Ever eager to please the father who favored him, and evidently equally unaware of the intensity of the hatred of his brothers toward him, Joseph immediately responded “I will go” (v. 13). And so off Jacob sent his son, “‘go now and see about the welfare of your brothers and the welfare of the flock, and bring word back to me.’ So he sent him from the Valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem” (v. 14). Jacob could not have even guessed that it would be more than twenty years before he would see his son again.

Joseph’s search did not go well. His brothers were not near Shechem. So he wandered about trying to find them, no doubt asking strangers if they had seen several men tending what must have been dozens, if not hundreds, of animals. Finally, Joseph seemed to have some luck.

“¹⁵A man found him, and behold, he was wandering in the field; and the man asked him, ‘what are you looking for?’ ¹⁶He said, ‘I am looking for my brothers; please tell me where they are pasturing the flock.’ ¹⁷Then the man said, ‘they have moved from here; for I heard them say, “let’s go to Dothan.”’ So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan’ (v. 15-17).

This unidentified man reminds the reader of the ‘man’ who wrestled with Jacob at Peniel. Whether this man was angelic or not is not important. Joseph was about to go from a place of love and honor at the center of his family’s home into an environment of hostility and slavery. Clearly God was moving events in the direction He had chosen.

Takeaways

As we begin the story of Joseph, we see God orchestrating events to bring about His sovereign plan. The favoritism of Jacob, the arrogance of Jacob, and the bitterness of his brothers are all used by God to bring about His will. We can take comfort, and a warning, from that.