

## **Genesis 37:18-36** **Joseph the Slave**

When we left our narrative, Joseph was on a mission for his father. He was to join his brothers, see how they were doing, and report back. So, he had searched expectantly near Shechem, where his brothers had gone to pasture the flocks. Not finding them there, he had wandered in futility until a stranger informed him that they had moved on to Dothan. Making his way another dozen miles or so, he was now approaching the plain of Dothan on which lay the city of the same name. Modern excavation has shown that, in the age of the patriarchs, the city possessed heavily fortified walls, in keeping with a time of decentralization in Canaan where each city-state was reliable for its own defenses. And away from these walls, out in the countryside, Joseph's brothers were keeping their flocks. His brothers, who had traveled many miles, more than sixty, to find good available grazing and water had not been heard from for a while, and Jacob had been concerned. So he had sent his favorite son to see how things were going.

Knowing the background of the narrative as we do, we can wonder why the brothers went near Shechem in the first place. After all, it was the site of their sister's rape and their own vengeance on the men of the town. We can also wonder why Jacob sent his favorite son on this journey, when he must have known how very unpopular he was among his siblings. We can even wonder about the nature of the 'man' that helped the wandering Joseph eventually find his way to Dothan where his brothers were shepherding their flocks. But despite these many questions, one certainty is that God was moving through the actions of all these men to bring about His sovereign plan.

### **The Plot Proposed**

As the brothers rested about their camp in Dothan, they saw an all too familiar figure approaching. Joseph may have been a complete surprise, or perhaps they half-expected their younger brother to come checking up on them at the request of their father. After all, they had been burned by Joseph's reports before (Genesis 37:2). In any case, the sight of Joseph could not have been a welcome one. In fact, "when they saw him from a distance, and before he came closer to them, they plotted against him to put him to death" (v.18). It is ironic that the multicolored coat that Jacob made for his favorite son was what must have allowed the brothers to notice him even "from a distance" and it proved to be both a motivation for, and provide an opportunity to plan, his abduction.

To a reader unfamiliar with the backstory, the response of the brothers may seem an overreaction. But they had tired of Joseph's tattling on them, of the favoritism shown by their father (especially that coat), and most recently of his flaunting his dreams that revealed his glorious future as the head of the family. So pervasive was the hatred of Joseph by his brothers that it seems there was no leader of the group. All his brothers hated him. The murder is more a mob mentality than the plan of one particular brother. Obviously, someone must have spoken first and begun the conversation, but soon all joined in as they encouraged each other and reminded each other of the presumed offenses they had suffered at the hands of their younger brother. "They said to one another, 'here comes this dreamer!'" (v. 19). The dreams, the coat, and all the other signs of favoritism Jacob had shown to his favorite son were rehearsed bitterly as Joseph walked toward his brothers.

Their sarcasm and bitterness quickly took shape. They “plotted against him” (v. 18). The word used indicates deceitful actions against another. For example, it is the same word used to describe the actions of Pharaoh toward the Israelites. And their plot was neither sophisticated nor subtle; they were going to kill him. But as with all premeditated murders where the perpetrator hopes to escape judgment, they had to find a way to make it look like an accident. So they said, “now then, come and let’s kill him, and throw him into one of the pits; and we will say, ‘a vicious animal devoured him.’ Then we will see what will become of his dreams!” (v. 20). The language gives an indication of the heat and frenzy into which the brothers had worked themselves. And we can also see that together, they had the courage, if we can use that word, to do a deed that none of them would have performed individually.

And the deed is described in simple, but brutal terms. The word translated ‘kill’ is *hārag*, which refers to a violent killing . . .

Of an animal, “Instead, there is joy and jubilation,  
Killing of cattle and slaughtering of sheep,  
Eating of meat and drinking of wine:  
Let’s eat and drink, for tomorrow we may die” (Isaiah 22:13).

In battle, “For Pharaoh king of Egypt had gone up and overthrown Gezer and burned it with fire, and killed the Canaanites who lived in the city; and he had given it as a dowry to his daughter, Solomon’s wife” (1 Kings 9:16).

Murder, “If, however, someone is enraged against his neighbor, so as to kill him in a cunning way, you are to take him even from My altar, to be put to death” (Exodus 21:14).

Criminal execution, “<sup>15</sup>If there is a man who has sexual intercourse with an animal, he must be put to death; you shall also kill the animal. <sup>16</sup>If there is a woman who approaches any animal to mate with it, you shall kill the woman and the animal; they must be put to death. They have brought their own deaths upon themselves” (Leviticus 20:15-16).

And, of course, fratricide, “Cain talked to his brother Abel; and it happened that when they were in the field Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him” (Genesis 4:8).

“<sup>41</sup>So Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him; and Esau said to himself, ‘the days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob’” (Genesis 27:41).

The motive for the murder is simply stated in the text as well. The brothers wanted to preemptively strike to preclude any of Joseph’s dreams ever coming to pass. But they knew that their father would certainly ask about Joseph. So they planned to kill their brother, dispose of the body, and then claim Joseph had been attacked by a wild animal. Though eliminated by hunting and urbanization today, at the time of the

patriarchs, both the bear and the lion roamed the wilds of Canaan. So their story was easily believable in such an environment, and with no one to contradict them (remember they are some sixty miles from the family settlement in Hebron), they were certain to get away with it.

### **Reuben's Alternative**

As the brothers whispered, and as Joseph came closer, Reuben, the eldest, proposed an alternative. “Reuben heard this and rescued him out of their hands by saying, ‘let’s not take his life’” (v. 21). One can only imagine the looks on the faces of the other brothers as Reuben stood up for Joseph. Incredulous, they must have stared at him in disbelief. But Reuben knew he could not stop there. He had to offer an alternative. So, “Reuben said to them, ‘shed no blood. Throw him into this pit that is in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him’ - so that later he might rescue him out of their hands, to return him to his father” (v. 22).

Reuben used the language of Genesis 9:4-6, a text, or at least a story, that must have been familiar. “<sup>4</sup>But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. <sup>5</sup>I certainly will require your lifeblood; from every animal I will require it. And from every person, from every man as his brother I will require the life of a person.

<sup>6</sup>Whoever sheds human blood,  
By man his blood shall be shed,  
For in the image of God  
He made mankind.”

He reminded his brothers of the penalty God laid on those who murdered. Knowing he could not possibly hope to persuade his brothers to leave Joseph alone, this opportunity was too perfect all alone in the wilderness some sixty miles from the family settlement, the best he could hope for was to buy some time while he came up with a plan to help Joseph escape.

It is clear that Reuben wanted to save Joseph, but Scripture does not state why Reuben had this moment of conscience. Perhaps he believed that since he was the eldest brother, the curse of fratricide would fall on him more significantly. Perhaps he hoped to improve himself in his father’s eyes by playing the hero and saving Jacob’s favorite son. After all, he had had the scandalous affair with his father’s concubine, word of which had spread throughout the local area and brought shame to the family, “and it came about, while Israel was living in that land, that Reuben went and slept with his father’s concubine Bilhah, and Israel heard about it” (Genesis 35:22). Though mentioned only in passing in the biblical text, the act must have created a tremendous breach in the relationship between Reuben and his father. Or perhaps, being the eldest, while he did not like Joseph he had the maturity to realize that murder was not the appropriate response. We simply do not know. Scripture does relate that Joseph did not learn of Reuben’s advocacy on his part until much later when the brothers returned to Egypt. And then, it moved Joseph to tears (Genesis 42:22-24).

It is clear that the brothers liked the idea. After all, it would accomplish the same ends as Joseph’s murder, but without having to do the deed themselves. They could just drop him into a pit without food or water and let nature take its course over the next several days. Essentially, they could avoid judgment

on a technicality. These cisterns were shaped like a bottle with a narrow opening at the surface and then a rounder interior. They often were coated with plaster and were used to contain the precious water that came with the rains. A pitcher or bucket could be lowered into the cistern to draw up the water as needed. In the meantime the water would be deep in the ground and safe from evaporation and contamination by animals. Often a stone covered the opening of the well. Near such a well Abraham's servant had met Rebekah, and Jacob had first laid eyes on Rachel. The fact that the well was empty was a sign that there may have been a drought and may further explain why the brothers had to travel so far to find good grazing. Alone within the empty well, Joseph had little chance of survival.

Notice also that Reuben suggested that Joseph be thrown into "a pit that is in the wilderness" (v. 22). This would appeal to the brothers, who could rest easy that any cries from Joseph would not be heard in the remote lands away from the city of Dothan, but it also served Reuben as well. Reuben's plan was to return later and bring Joseph out of the well, and this could more easily be done if the well were far away from where the brothers were pasturing the flock. But here we must wonder why Reuben risked the wrath of his brothers who would not only see their plan to kill their brother thwarted, but now be exposed to their father for trying to murder his favorite son.

### **The Plot Revised and Executed**

When he entered the camp. Joseph was not greeted kindly by his brothers. <sup>23</sup>"So it came about, when Joseph reached his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the multicolored tunic that was on him; <sup>24</sup>and they took him and threw him into the pit. Now the pit was empty, without any water in it" (v. 23-24). He was handled roughly. There was no attempt to lead him quietly away. He was grabbed, had his clothes torn off, and was dragged or carried to a well into which he was unceremoniously dropped. We can assume that Reuben played along just to make sure his brothers did not expect that he eventually planned to rescue Joseph.

Having disposed of their brother, the men returned to their camp and "sat down to eat a meal" (v. 25). They were impervious to guilt or shame it seems. Rather, they had worked up an appetite and surely they felt the rush of adrenalin from their exertions. They must have been bragging to one another about the various roles they had played in carrying their brother away. They must also have been rejoicing in the fact that this dreamer would not live to make his dreams a reality. We might think that the men had traveled with servants to help them tend the flock, but if there were, either the brothers kept quiet enough, or the servants didn't care.

But as they sat eating, an opportunity presented itself. "As they raised their eyes and looked, behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites was coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying labdanum resin, balsam, and myrrh, on their way to bring them down to Egypt" (v. 25). Once again, the narrative unfolds because of something seen at a distance. And as with the encounter with Joseph, the brothers make their plan in advance of meeting the approaching party.

These Ishmaelites were distant relations who traveled the caravan routes of the Near East trading goods. The mention of their name reminds the reader of the Abraham, Sarah, Hagar saga we discussed previously. They were among the many bedouin people who journeyed from the Tigris and Euphrates

river valleys to Egypt. They followed the same trade routes back and forth, much like truck drivers today traveling the interstate highways. Evidence from the historical record shows that there was a busy network of trade happening from Egypt to India at this time. The particular products mentioned were used by the Egyptians in their burial rituals of mummification. That the brothers were also familiar with these traders, or others like them, is likely, since we know that the family possessed the products these traders supplied (Genesis 43:11).

While Scripture does not state who first came up with the plan to kill Joseph, it does tell us who originated the idea of modifying the plan to their own advantage. “<sup>26</sup>Judah said to his brothers, ‘what profit is it for us to kill our brother and cover up his blood? <sup>27</sup>Come, and let’s sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.’ And his brothers listened to him” (v. 26-27). Thus it seems that Judah also began to have second thoughts about murdering their brother, though clearly not for the same noble reasons as Reuben. Judah simply did not want to let an opportunity to make money go to waste.

And notice that he does not merely give Joseph to the Ishmaelites, though that would accomplish the same purpose of removing Joseph to a foreign land. Judah wants silver in return. Such an act would later be codified into law and require capital punishment.

“Now one who kidnaps someone, whether he sells him or he is found in his possession, shall certainly be put to death” (Exodus 21:16).

“If someone is caught kidnapping any of his countrymen of the sons of Israel, and he treats him as merchandise and sells him, then that thief shall die; so you shall eliminate the evil from among you.” (Deuteronomy 24:7).

Such an act was so universally condemned, that we also find it in Hammurabi’s code of law in contemporary Babylon.

The idea seemed sensible to his brothers, so as “some Midianite traders passed by . . . they pulled him out and lifted Joseph out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. So they brought Joseph into Egypt” (v. 28). We need not be confused by the conflating of names. The Ishmaelites and Midianites were the same people group, as we can see in Judges 8:22-28. It is thought that ‘Ishmaelites’ is the more generic name and ‘Midianites’ the more specific ethnic group. This may explain why the narrator refers to them as Ishmaelites when they are at a distance but Midianites when they are close by. Recall that both groups were descendants of the rejected line of Abraham (Genesis 17:18-19, 25:2).

So, the brothers called to the Ishmaelites to stop and some of the men must have gone to retrieve Joseph from the well, while the others remained in camp and did the negotiating. What Joseph must have thought at this moment is not recorded. Perhaps being pulled from the well he thought his troubles were over. Perhaps he believed that his brothers had simply tried to scare him or intimidate him. But if he thought he was safe, he was to be disappointed.

We know from ancient texts that twenty shekels of silver was the average price for a male slave of Joseph's age. Babylonian, Ugaritic and other ancient texts attest to this. As a young man of seventeen, and we would assume in reasonable health, he had many years of work ahead of him. In fact, a equivalent can even be found in the Mosaic Law for someone to who is dedicated to the Lord, "if the person is from five years even to twenty years old, then your assessment for a male shall be twenty shekels, and for a female, ten shekels" (Leviticus 27:5).

### **The Plot Accomplished**

It seems that Reuben was not among his brothers when Joseph was sold into slavery. Where he was we do not know, but he may have been off tending the sheep and protecting them from the traders. After all, if these Ishmaelites were willing to engage in the slave trade, they likely would not be above stealing some sheep. His absence meant he was unaware that his plan to rescue Joseph had been ruined. <sup>29</sup>Reuben returned to the pit, and behold, Joseph was not in the pit; so he tore his garments. <sup>30</sup>He returned to his brothers and said, 'the boy is not there; as for me, where am I to go?'" (v. 29-30).

Wherever he was, Reuben saw the brothers distracted by the trading caravan and went to rescue Joseph. Only after arriving at the well and calling out to an empty cistern, did he realize that his plans had gone awry. How quickly he associated the arrival of the Ishmaelites with the departure of Joseph we do not know, but the understanding could not have been a pleasant one. Now Joseph was forever, it seemed, removed from rescue. He had hoped to save the boy but now, as the eldest brother, he would have to take responsibility, or at least explain, the death/disappearance of the favorite son. It seems he even pondered not returning home because of the situation.

Ignoring Reuben's plaintive cry, the brothers continued with their plan. Whether Joseph had died in the well or been sold into slavery, they still needed an explanation for their father. So they continued with their original idea of stating that Joseph had been killed by a wild beast. <sup>31</sup>they took Joseph's tunic, and slaughtered a male goat, and dipped the tunic in the blood; <sup>32</sup>and they sent the multicolored tunic and brought it to their father and said, 'we found this; please examine it to see whether it is your son's tunic or not'" (v. 31-32).

Joseph had been wearing his coat. Surely it was not the only one he had, no doubt he wore it to flaunt his role as his father's emissary to check up on his brothers. The fact that he wore it though, only helped make the brother's story more plausible. After all, it was not just any bloodstained cloth that they would show Jacob, but the one remarkable piece that he had painstakingly made himself for his favorite son.

So they took a goat from among the many they had, slaughtered it, and drenched Joseph's robe in the blood. One cannot miss the irony that Jacob had deceived his father by wearing goat skins to resemble his brother Esau, and now Jacob, himself, was about to be deceived by a garment dipped in the blood of a goat.

When the brothers returned to the family settlement in Hebron, no doubt Jacob was looking first for Joseph. We do not know if they came back immediately, or if they finished grazing and returned with the flocks. In any case they offered the bloodstained robe to their father. Notice that they cannot even say

Joseph's name or even refer to him as their brother. He is simply "your son" (v. 32). Neither do they try to offer an explanation. Nor do they explain why they do not have Joseph's body, only his robe. They let Jacob draw his own conclusions.

Jacob <sup>33</sup>examined it and said, 'it is my son's tunic. A vicious animal has devoured him; Joseph has surely been torn to pieces!' <sup>34</sup>So Jacob tore his clothes, and put on a sackcloth undergarment over his waist, and mourned for his son many days" (v. 33-34). Jacob put two and two together. He held the torn and bloody robe, there was no body to be buried, so Joseph must have been violently torn apart by a wild beast. Remember that Jacob had spent many years in the fields as well, tending both his flocks and Laban's, so he must have had his own share of close calls with wild animals. And reaching this conclusion himself, Jacob never questioned his sons. Nor did he suspect anything. In a culture where such a tragedy was often the sign of God's displeasure, Jacob may even have wondered if his sin or the sin of Joseph was responsible for his favorite son's untimely and horrible death.

The brothers could do away with Joseph, but not with their father's love for his favorite son. Jacob had begun to mourn in the customary fashion. He "tore his clothes, and put on a sackcloth undergarment over his waist" (v. 34). Remember that Reuben had also "tore his garments" (v. 29). Such an act was a sign of not only death, but also of both penitence and supplication.

<sup>1</sup>Then it was reported to Joab, 'behold, the king is weeping and he mourns for Absalom.' <sup>2</sup>So the victory that day was turned into mourning for all the people, because the people heard it said that day, 'the king is in mourning over his son'" (2 Samuel 19:1-2).

"Then Ezra rose from before the house of God and went into the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib. Although he went there, he did not eat bread nor drink water, because he was mourning over the unfaithfulness of the exiles" (Ezra 10:6).

<sup>4</sup>Now when I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. <sup>5</sup>I said, 'please, Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps the covenant and faithfulness for those who love Him and keep His commandments: <sup>6</sup>let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open, to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have committed against You; I and my father's house have sinned" (Nehemiah 1:4-6).

Perhaps Jacob meant all three in this case. Scripture states that he mourned for an undisclosed amount of time. Later Old Testament examples of mourning show that Aaron and Moses were mourned for thirty days (Numbers 20:29; Deuteronomy 34:8), and Joseph was mourned for seventy days (Genesis 50:3) when he really died.

Shamelessly keeping up the deception, "all his sons and all his daughters got up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. And he said, 'surely I will go down to Sheol in mourning for my son.' So his father wept for him" (v. 35). We only know of Dinah as a daughter, but the text can also include daughters-in-law as well as other daughters born to Jacob that Scripture does not mention by name. It is a

grotesque facade. Imagine his sons trying to console their father when, on the inside, they are rejoicing at the situation.

Another brief point to make is that this is the first place in Scripture where Sheol is mentioned. It is the place of the afterlife, where the dead remain. At this point in God's revelation, it seems the patriarchs had no idea of heaven or hell, but rather a place where all the dead went upon dying. This does not mean that Scripture contradicts itself, but only that God's revelation is progressive in nature.

As Jacob mourns, the caravan of Ishmaelites reached Egypt. They unpacked their goods and entertained customers. Among those was a representative of Pharaoh's household. Whether he went there to buy a slave is not certain, he may have just been passing along. Yet, as we have seen throughout this narrative, God was at work. The passage ends with a transition. "Meanwhile, the Midianites sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, Pharaoh's officer, the captain of the bodyguard" (v. 36). The next phase of Joseph's life was about to begin.

### **Takeaways**

We have all heard it said that things happen for a reason. But that cliché is true. And that reason is God's sovereign plan. To take but one example from this narrative, had the caravan of Ishmaelites not happened by at the time they did, Joseph would have perished in the well. But that is not just circumstance. It is God sovereignly directing the actions of men for His purposes. We ought to remember this when events happen that we do not foresee or that seem inconvenient. In our lives as well, things happen for a reason.