

## Genesis 37

### Limits of the Text

Genesis 37 begins the twelfth and final *toledoth* in the book of the Genesis; the remainder of the book is about the genealogies of Jacob, and it focuses upon Joseph in Egypt. This chapter sets the Joseph story in motion, and is framed by the start of the *toledoth* and the story of Judah and Tamar in chapter 38.

### Interpretation

Genesis 37 begins what some have called the story of Joseph; though he's the main character, it's really not a story about Joseph. It's a story about the faithful, covenant-keeping God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who used Joseph to save his family and transform all of Jacob's sons into covenant-worthy partners.<sup>1</sup> Every character in this chapter of the narrative is depicted as a failure: Jacob was partial, Joseph was unwise and boastful, Reuben was irresponsible, and Judah was mercenary. Despite these failures, God was providentially at work.

There are two major movements in this text. In the first movement, Joseph was hated by his brothers.

37:1 Jacob lived in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan.<sup>2</sup>

The writer of Hebrews noted that although Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob trusted God, they did not personally experience God's promise to possess the land; they were strangers and exiles (He 11:13), sojourners.

37:2 These are the generations of Jacob. 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.

The *toledoth* of Jacob officially begins in verse two. The genealogies that typically accompany the *toledoth* are given later (46:8-27).

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<sup>1</sup> Waltke, 491.

<sup>2</sup> All quotes from ESV unless specified otherwise.

Moses began by giving a picture of Joseph. Joseph worked with his brothers shepherding the flocks, but Joseph was not *with* his brothers. Their lack of unity is described three ways. One, he was young, much younger than his brothers. Two, he was not the son of Bilhah or Zilpah, but the son of Rachel, the favored wife. Three, he brought information about his brothers to his father. The Hebrew word translated by the ESV as report “denotes news slanted to damage the victim.”<sup>3</sup> His brothers had done something wrong, and Joseph made sure his father knew about it.

Was Joseph was a tattle-tale against his brothers or a dutiful son towards his father? The text isn’t clear, and the answer may depend in part from whose perspective we look at the situation; whatever the answer, the brothers’ didn’t like it. The tension in the narrative is the brothers’ hatred for Joseph, and this tension comes from a combination of four events. The report was the first event.

Morris estimates that these events took place about two years after the events of 35:27.<sup>4</sup>

[37:3 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.](#)

The sin of favoritism was generational in Abraham’s family. Isaac loved Esau, while Rebekah loved Jacob. Jacob loved Rachel over Leah. After her death (35:19), he loved Joseph over his brothers and demonstrated his favoritism by making him a robe. Once again Jacob had sinned, and his sin would impact his entire family.

What is a robe of many colors? The exact nature of this robe is not known; the Hebrew word used here is rare. It might refer to its coloring (e.g., multicolored), to its ornamentation (e.g., embroidered), to its construction (e.g., long robe with sleeves), or to all of the above.

What did it signify? Most importantly it signified his father’s favor; Jacob loved Joseph with partiality. It may have also set “Joseph apart as the one who would receive the double-portion of the inheritance.”<sup>5</sup> As the word is used in 2 Sam

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<sup>3</sup> Waltke, 499.

<sup>4</sup> Morris, 533-4.

<sup>5</sup> Hughes, 438.

13:18-19, it may have signified authority or royalty as well. "By this regal apparel...Jacob publicly designates Joseph as ruler over the family."<sup>6</sup>

37:4 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.

Jacob's extreme favoritism was the second event that cause Joseph's brothers to hate him, so much so that they could not even be civil towards him.

37:5 Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more.

37:6 He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed:

37:7 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."

37:8 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.

In his sovereignty, God had chosen Joseph, not so much because he wanted Joseph to rule over his brothers, but because he had chosen a ruler to be his agent for saving the nation of Israel from the coming famine. God was at work to keep his covenant.

The sheaves in the dream appear to predict Joseph's work in Egypt (41:49), though it is less obvious if the celestial bodies in the second dream function in a similar manner.

Apparently the magnificence of the dream combined with his own immaturity propelled Joseph to gush forth about his experience. In effect the young man boldly proclaimed that God had decreed that he would one day rule over them. The significance of the dream was not lost on his brothers. Not only did their father favor him, he was dreaming about ruling over them! This was the third event that caused them to hate him.

37:9 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."

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<sup>6</sup> Waltke, 500.

37:10 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?"

37:11 And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind.

Why did God give Joseph a second dream? In a later narrative God gave Pharaoh two dreams, and Joseph told Pharaoh that two dreams meant "the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about" (41:32). Apparently God wanted to make sure that both Joseph and his family knew that the dreams would come true. "An isolated dream might be misinterpreted. Two dreams with the same meaning confirm the interpretation."<sup>7</sup>

It seems to me that Jacob had a bit of a double standard. If Joseph was going to one day rule over his brothers, that was fine; he was the favored son, after all. But if Joseph was going to rule over him as well, that was more than Joseph wanted to hear, so he rebuked his son. The word rebuke means that Jacob believed his son had done wrong, and he disapproved of it, and as a result there was a strain in their relationship.<sup>8</sup> But while he publicly reprimanded his son, he privately pondered the significance of the dreams.<sup>9</sup> Joseph had experienced God's dreams and God's promises and the reversal of the younger over the older; it may be that realized everything Joseph had claimed was possible.

Unsurprisingly Joseph's brothers didn't take to the second dream, and they added jealousy to their hatred of him. This was the fourth and final event that caused his brothers to hate him, and the tension at this point in narrative is so intense that something dramatic has to happen. Their jealousy precipitated their betrayal. "Human sin and divine revelation combined to produce a hatred and rejection that ultimately created a way of salvation."<sup>10</sup>

It should be noted, however, that there was one significant difference between the first two events (i.e., the report and the robe) and the last two (i.e., the dreams). The first two originated from man; the second two from God. When

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<sup>7</sup> Waltke, 501.

<sup>8</sup> Swanson, DBLH 1721.

<sup>9</sup> Mathews, 686.

<sup>10</sup> Hughes, 436.

the brothers rejected the dreams, they indirectly opposed the sovereign God who had given the revelation.<sup>11</sup>

What do we make of Joseph? The Bible is careful to present every person as flawed; none were perfect but Jesus. Some have found it difficult to find any flaws in Joseph, but this chapter provides several. "The young Joseph is sketched as immature, unwise, boastful, and extremely talkative."<sup>12</sup> His brothers need to be transformed by God to be worthy of the covenant, and so did Joseph.

In the second movement of the text, Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers.

37:12 Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem.  
37:13 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."  
37:14 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.

Only two years previous Simeon and Levi had massacred and plundered the town of Shechem (34:25-29), causing the surrounding towns to want to kill Jacob's family (34:20; 35:5). Perhaps Jacob had good reason to want to know if his sons were well, or perhaps this was simply a typical responsibility of Joseph. In either case, Joseph promptly obeyed his father and set off. Both appeared to be oblivious to the hatred of the other sons.

37:15 And a man found him wandering in the fields. And the man asked him, "What are you seeking?"  
37:16 "I am seeking my brothers," he said. "Tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock."  
37:17 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.

Why is this man in the text? He seems to emphasize the providence of God. Joseph just happened to meet a man who just happened to overhear where his brothers were going so Joseph could just happen to arrive exactly as the Midianites just happened to be passing by.<sup>13</sup> This man is a part of God's bigger

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<sup>11</sup> Waltke, 501.

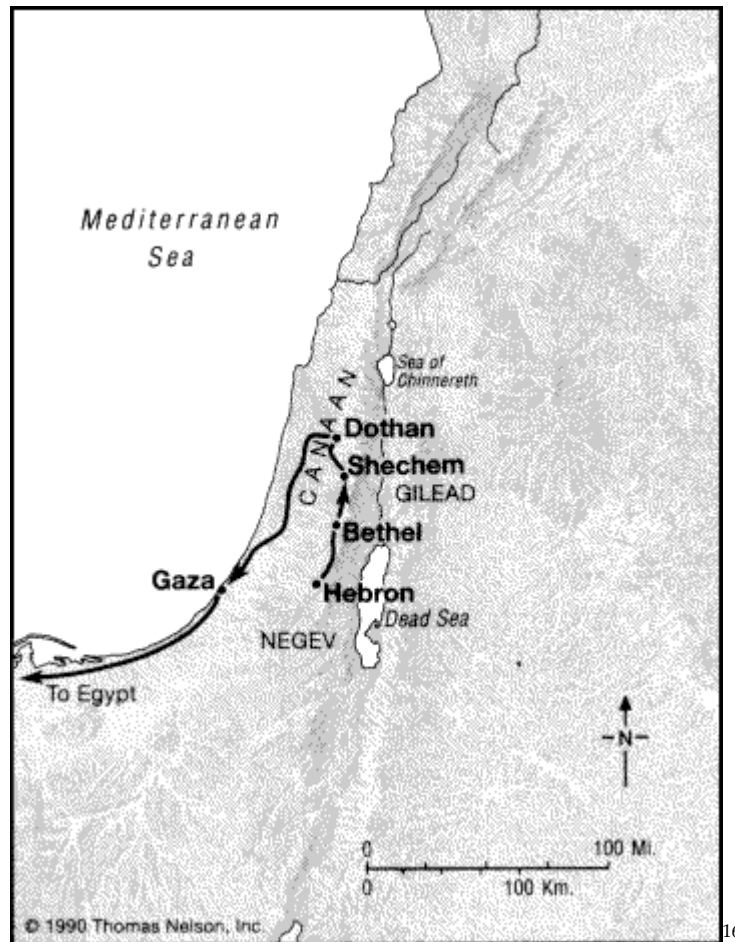
<sup>12</sup> Greidanus, 338.

<sup>13</sup> Waltke, 492.

plan; “he is directing Joseph to discover his brother so that the divine plan for the salvation of Jacob and many people (50:20) might be realized.”<sup>14</sup>

Was this man an angel? We don’t know; the text doesn’t give any indications. Given God’s hand in this encounter, it’s at least possible.

When Joseph arrived in Dothan, he was approximately 64 miles away from home.<sup>15</sup>



[37:18 They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him.](#)

At this point in the narrative there is a change in perspective from Joseph’s point of view to his brothers.

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<sup>14</sup> Mathews, 695.

<sup>15</sup> Hughes, 444.

<sup>16</sup> *Nelson’s*.

The brothers recognized their brother long before he arrived, probably because of his distinct coat.

37:19 They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer.

37:20 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."

The dreamer was far away from home and from his father's protection; this was the perfect place to put their still smoldering hate into action. So they fanned their hatred into a fire and came up with a plan to. But they were doing more than just plotting against a brother. By plotting to kill Joseph and stop the dreams, Joseph's brothers have chosen to oppose God and thwart his plans.

37:21 But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life."

37:22 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.

Reuben's argument was that the shedding of blood would make them guilty of murder; but if they simply tossed him in a pit until an animal killed him or he starved to death, then they would not be guilty. (I don't think this technicality would satisfy God, but the brothers were probably not thinking quite that clearly at this point.) They were evidently aware of the consequences of shedding another man's blood (9:5-6). Although this hadn't stopped Simeon and Levi at Shechem (34:25-26), it prevented the fratricide of Joseph.

Was Reuben good or bad in this episode? On the one hand Reuben was good; he took a leadership role and commanded his brothers not to slay Joseph. On the other hand his leadership was weak; instead of immediately freeing his brother and demanding that the others repent of their sinful intentions, the best he could do was devise with a sneaky plan to rescue Joseph.

Why did Reuben want to rescue him? Reuben was the oldest brother, and 37:29-30 reveals that he had a strong sense of responsibility for his younger brother. It's possible that he may have also been trying to get back into his father's good graces after his debacle with Bilhah (35:22).

37:23 So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore.

37:24 And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

So they carried out their plan, and threw him in a pit. The pit was probably a cistern, because the text indicates it was dry at this time. A cistern was “a shaft in the ground (plastered and so holding water), bottle-shaped with a narrow top (with a stone cap), hewn out of generally soft stone, which collects water and holds it.”<sup>17</sup> Archeologists have found them all over Israel, ranging anywhere from 6 to 20 feet in depth.<sup>18</sup>

37:25 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.

“Nothing like administering a good beating to whet the appetite!”<sup>19</sup> Their hearts were so full of hatred that even though Joseph begged them to let him out (42:21), they ignored him and ate their meal.

They were near the town of Dothan, which was on a major trading route; thus the appearance of merchants was not surprising.

37:26 Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood?

37:27 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.

Why did Judah want to sell Joseph? Were his motives good or bad or both? That Judah’s motives were bad can be seen from the noun “profit” in 37:26. The root comes from a verb which means “to cut off what is not one’s own, or in the slang of our day, to take a ‘rip-off,’ thus to be greedy, covetous.”<sup>20</sup> The noun form has the idea of gain made unjustly or by violence.<sup>21</sup> Judah was looking to take advantage of Joseph’s situation for his own personal gain. Judah’s idea was

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<sup>17</sup> Swanson, DBLH 1014.

<sup>18</sup> Waltke, 502.

<sup>19</sup> Hughes, 446.

<sup>20</sup> Harris, 122.

<sup>21</sup> Brown, 130.

nothing original; the buying and selling of slaves was common in Egypt at this time.

37:28 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.

So were these merchants Midianites or Ishmaelites? The answer is yes, they were both. There are a number of theories on how both terms could apply to the same group of people. One theory is that Ishmaelite was a very broad term while Midianite referred to a specific ethnic group.<sup>22</sup> Another is they were the intermarried descendents of Midian from Keturah (Abraham's wife after Sarah's death) and of Ishmael from Hagar.<sup>23</sup>

Why the name change back and forth? The change name does not appear to be significant, as both names were applicable, unless perhaps it serves to reinforce the point that Joseph was being sold to people who were outside of the covenant.<sup>24</sup>

"The sale price of 'twenty shekels of silver' was the typical price for a slave in the early second millennium (e.g., Laws of Hammurapi)."<sup>25</sup> Was this a foreshadowing of Jesus being sold by Judas for twenty pieces of silver? Although there are a number of parallels in the story to Jesus,<sup>26</sup> I do not think this foreshadowed that future event. Nowhere does the New Testament mention Joseph as a type of Christ, and I agree with Morris, who says it's best to avoid typological interpretations except where there is explicit biblical warrant.<sup>27</sup>

37:29 When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes

37:30 and returned to his brothers and said, "The boy is gone, and I, where shall I go?"

Why did Reuben react like this? "As the oldest son, he is responsible for the boy,"<sup>28</sup> and the tearing of his clothes revealed that he took this responsibility

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<sup>22</sup> Mathews, 698. Other suggestions can be found on this same page.

<sup>23</sup> Waltke, 503.

<sup>24</sup> Hughes, 446.

<sup>25</sup> Mathews, 699.

<sup>26</sup> See Greidanus, 344, for more parallels.

<sup>27</sup> Morris, 535.

<sup>28</sup> Greidanus, 341.

seriously. His plan for rescuing Joseph had failed, and now he would have to face his father.

Reuben's outburst elicited no response from the others. Perhaps only now did they see a potential flaw in their plan: Reuben might be blamed for their sin.

37:31 Then they took Joseph's robe and slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood.

37:32 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."

37:33 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."

There was nothing to do but carry on with their plan. The sons pretended that they had never seen Joseph, only found this coat. So they Jacob him the coat and let him draw his own conclusions,<sup>29</sup> and Jacob concluded the worst. The amount of the blood and the tears in the robe convinced him that Joseph had been brutally attacked and killed.

What goes around comes around. As Jacob deceived his father with the skins of goats (27:19-27), so they deceived Jacob with the blood of a goat. The sons of the deceiver again demonstrated that how much they were like their father. They had been successful in fooling the Shechemites (34:13), and they were successful in fooling their father.

37:34 Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days.

37:35 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.

Once again the love of Jacob came to the foreground of the story. Although he mourned his son with the traditional acts of mourning, he refused to limit the time of his mourning. Typically the deceased would be mourned for a specified number of days, usually a week for a child, but Jacob refused all comfort and continued to keep mourning. He could not see any end to his mourning; he would grieve till he died.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Greidanus, 341.

<sup>30</sup> Mathews, 701.

On this sad note the story ends, and the tension has been resolved. The sons have eliminated the source of their hostility, cleverly managing both to avoid murder and to make a tidy profit at the same time, and have kept Reuben from being blamed. They did not, however, count on the pain this would cause their father.

37:36 Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard.

Moses added a short postscript to the story, a ray of hope: Joseph wasn't dead, and the story was not over just yet; perhaps the dreams might come true after all.

If God's sovereignty was on display in the first half of the narrative, his providence was on display in the second fact. By it God saved Joseph three times: first through Reuben, who spared his life, second through Judah, who proposed selling him, and third through the Midianites, who sold him to a man near Pharaoh. "Here is reality. Real life is unfair. Real life deals out many inequalities...But the transcending eternal reality is that God is all-powerful and that his massive providence is at work in his children's behalf."<sup>31</sup>

God was working to fulfill his promise to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions" (Ge 15:13-14).

And God was also working to fulfill his promise to Jacob that kings would come from him. God put Joseph in Egypt so that he would store up the food so that Israel would be saved from famine so the nation would survive so that kings would be born so that the Messiah would enter human history!

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<sup>31</sup> Hughes, 450.

### Three Levels of Narrative

1. Personal History – This is a story about family rivalry. Jacob showed favoritism to Joseph, Joseph shared his dreams, and his brothers reacted in anger and sold him into slavery.
2. National History – This is a story about the formation of Israel, the initial actions of the fathers of the twelve tribes. They were a divided, bickering group, who seemed destined to implode and ruin the promises made to their father.
3. Redemptive History – This is a story about the faithful, covenant-keeping God who providentially guided events to ensure the survival of his chosen people despite their many sins and failures.

### The Gospel

1. What does this text teach us about ourselves? What need or deficiency in our lives does it expose? We tend to show favoritism to those who love most, and we tend to get jealous and angry when favoritism is shown to someone else. If we do not repent quickly of our sin but let it fester inside us, we are capable of anything, including murder. We need a God who loves us, protects us, and guides us even when we sin. We need a God who won't abandon us when we sin, but uses even our sin to change us.
2. What does this text teach us about God? How does it reveal God's grace to meet our need? God is sovereign, and he chooses people to carry out this plans. God is sovereign, and he providentially controls the events of history to guide and protect the people he has chosen.
3. How does this text stand in relation to the gospel? This text reflects a key aspect of our need for redemption through the gospel. We need a Savior who will not only save us from our sins, but will also work for us and change us despite our sins.

### Textual Outline

1. Joseph was hated by his brothers (1-11).
  - a. Joseph was hated because he was his father's favorite (1-4).
  - b. Joseph was hated because he had royal dreams (5-11).
2. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers (12-36).
  - a. Joseph found his brothers (12-17).
  - b. Joseph was betrayed by his brothers (18-28).
  - c. Joseph was mourned by his father (29-36).

## **Central Truth of the Text**

Moses wrote Gen 37 in order to teach the Israelites that God in his sovereignty chose, guided, and protected Joseph, despite the sins of he and his family.

## **Teaching Outline**

God's people trust in his sovereignty. God wants this church to cooperate with his sovereign working.

1. We accept the choices that God makes in his sovereignty.
2. We accept the guidance that God gives in his sovereignty.
3. We accept the protection that God provides in his sovereignty.

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