

Genesis 37

Chapter 37 begins the last, major, section of Genesis and Moses largely concentrates on Joseph. It is to be remembered that Moses wrote to his audience who had just come out of Egypt slavery. How did Israel arrive in Egypt? Genesis 37-50 answer that question. While Moses begins chapter 37 talking about Jacob, he will largely fade from the scene while his sons, notably Joseph, take center stage.

TRANSLATION - 37:1-4:

1 Now Jacob dwelt in the land of the temporary dwelling of his father, in the land of Canaan. **2** These [are] the generations of Jacob; Joseph, a son of seventeen years. He was pastoring with his brothers the flock and he [was] a young man, with the sons of Bilhah and with the sons of Zilpah, the wives of his father and Joseph came with their evil report to their father. **3** Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his brothers because the son of his old age he [was] to him and he made to him a tunic of sleeves. **4** And his brothers saw that him their father loved more than all the brothers and they hated him and were not able to speak peaceably.

WORDS:

“Report” (verse 2) is only found here in Genesis, out of nine occurrences. It means a “report or rumor.” “Tunic” (verse 3; 29x) can be translated “tunic, robe, garment.” In Genesis, it is only used here but it is used in this chapter nine times: 37:1, 3, 23, 31-33. “Sleeves” is found only in this context (37:3, 23, 32) and in 2 Sam. 13:18-19. Its meaning is unknown. The opinion is that it refers to some type of colorful needlework on the sleeves. The verb “to hate” (verse 4) is found 148x, three times in this chapter: 37:4-5, 8. It can also be translated “enemy.” “Peace” is used 237 times.

COMMENTS:

Jacob was dwelling in Canaan while the events of this chapter occur, in the land where his father, Isaac, and grandfather Abraham dwelt. Joseph will later insist on being buried in the Promised Land (50:24-26). “These are the generations” notes the tenth and last occurrence of this phrase, denoting major divisions of the book (2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1). Joseph was the oldest son of Jacob’s wife, Rachel, while she had also given birth to Benjamin, at whose birth Rachel passed away (35:16-21). As this chapter begins, Joseph is in his late teenage years, 17 years old. Joseph cared for his father’s flocks, along with the other sons. But, something was not right with the behavior of the other sons. Joseph brought back an “evil report” to his father. In the absence of evidence, we cannot know if Joseph was telling the truth or if the brothers were actually misbehaving in some way. Based on their subsequent behavior, we believe Joseph was telling the truth. But, this “tattling” made his brothers hate him.

To make matters worse, Jacob, identified here by Moses with his new name “Israel,” loved Joseph more than the other eleven sons. It is too bad that Jacob did not learn from his own experience how favoritism from parents causes problems in families. Because Jacob loved Joseph, he gave him a special tunic. We do not know what type of tunic this was or what made it special. It is based on the LXX translation that make us picture a tunic with many colors woven into it. While the LXX translators were closer to the age of Joseph (250 B. C.) than modern scholars, and perhaps knew better, we still cannot be certain about its appearance. There are no related words in related languages which might help clarify the picture either.

The evil report and the favoritism motivated the brothers to hate Joseph, to such an extent that they could not speak peaceably to him.

APPLICATION:

Contemporaries in the text - Many scholars, throughout this text, have difficulty assuming Joseph's innocence in the events. They usually picture him as bragging. That could be true. But it could also be the naïveté of a 17-year-old who is excited to be receiving special attention from dad and from God.

Contemporaries of Moses - The Law will forbid favoritism among parents and children (Deut. 21:15-17).

TRANSLATION - 37:5-11:

5 Now Joseph dreamed a dream and he reported to his brothers and they again more hated him. **6** And he said to them, "Listen, please, to this dream which I dreamed. **7** Now behold, we were binding sheaves in the middle of the field and behold my sheaf arose and also stood and behold surrounded your sheaves it and they bowed down to my sheaf."

8 Then his brothers spoke to him, "To reign, will you reign over us? Indeed, to rule, will you rule over us?" And they again more hated him on account of his dreams and on account of his words.

9 Then he dreamed again another dream and he announced it to his brothers and he said, "Behold, I dreamed a dream again and behold the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me." **10** Then he announced to his father and to his brothers and his father rebuked him and said to him, "What [is] this dream which you have dreamed? To come will I come, I and your mother and your brothers to bow down to you to the ground?"

11 And his brothers were jealous of him and his father kept the word.

WORDS:

The verb "to dream" (37:5-6, 9-10) is found 29 times and features prominently in Joseph's life (40:5, 8; 41:1, 5, 11, 15; 42:9). The noun is found 65 times and also features frequently in his life (37:5-6, 8-10, 19-20; 40:5, 8-9, 16; 41:7-8, 11-12, 15, 17, 22, 25-26, 32; 42:9). "Binding" is the verb form of the word "sheaf" (verse 7). "Rebuke" (verse 10; 14x) is only found here in Genesis. "To be jealous" (verse 11) is used 34 times, first in 26:14; 30:1. This will be its last usage in Genesis.

GRAMMAR:

"Binding" (verse 7) is a *piel* participle. "To bow down" (verses 7, 9) is a *hithpael*, a reflexive verb; the second one is a participle. "To reign, will you reign" and "to rule, will you rule" (verse 8) as well as "to come will I come" are the infinitive absolute coupled with the imperfect form of the same verb, for emphasis.

COMMENTS:

"Dreams" play a major role in Joseph's life, beginning at 17 years old. Here, God shares two messages with Joseph in the form of dreams. God does not talk to Joseph at all through these dreams, in contrast to God's speaking with Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham (20:3-7; 28:12-15; 31:11-13, 24). This dream motivated the brothers to intensify their hatred of Joseph. This dream pictured Joseph's sheaf being deeply respected by the sheaves of his brothers. While we do not believe the connotation is intended here, the word "bow" is often translated worship. Here, it simply denotes the reverence the brothers' sheaves have for Joseph's.

The brothers are incredulous, drawing the proper inference, that they would serve Joseph. First, they use the verb "to reign," of a king. Then they use a broader term, "to rule." Little did they anticipate that they would recognize the rulership of their younger brother (42:6). At this point, they hated Joseph even more intensely.

Joseph received another dream-message from God and shared it with his brothers. Again, we do not know if Joseph is bragging when he shares the dreams or he is excited about the dream and, naively, shares the dream with his brothers. Sometimes, we do not see the obvious in front of our faces! In this second dream, Joseph sees the sun, moon, and eleven stars bowing down to him. When he reported the dream to Jacob, his father was incredulous! He could not perceive that he would bow down to Joseph. To his credit, Jacob understood the significance of the dream. He just couldn't imagine it being true. Jacob mentions Joseph's "mother" here, although Rachel has been dead since 35:19. Perhaps Jacob is referring to Leah, his second wife, or to Bilhah, Rachel's maids who may have replaced that role in the life of Joseph and Benjamin. Or, perhaps Jacob understands the "moon" to refer to the mom as the "sun" refers to the dad and he maintains the imagery in his response.

Following this dream, Moses records that the brothers were jealous of Joseph. This gives us a different picture of them than earlier. Apparently, they hate Joseph *because* they are jealous of him! They are jealous of their dad's favoritism and they are jealous of God's favoritism in sharing this message of rulership with Joseph. However, Jacob will keep these words and dreams in his heart. Having someone interpret dreams never enters into Israelite practices. God reveals the message of the dreams He sends.

APPLICATION:

Contemporaries in the text - If Joseph was bragging in sharing these dreams, he will pay the price at the end of the chapter and spending time in servitude and in jail in Egypt. If he is naive, the events at the end of the chapter will certainly clarify for him how his brothers felt about him.

Contemporaries of Moses - Moses' contemporaries might anticipate the sons of Joseph, who take his place in the list of tribes of Israel, to raise to positions of influence as they subsequently do.

Later Hebrew writers - Primarily, it is Joseph's son, Ephraim, whose tribe assumes leadership in the period of the divided kingdom. "Ephraim" is mentioned 25 times in the books of 1 & 2 Chronicles, for example. In the prophets, Isaiah-Malachi, the tribe is found 66 times.

NT writers - It seems that John used the imagery from Joseph's second dream in Revelation 12:1. Just as Jacob kept Joseph's words in his heart so Mary kept the words of the angel's announcement of Jesus' birth in her heart (Luke 2:19) and Jesus' words to His parents when He was twelve years old (Luke 2:51). Stephen summarizes the evil treatment of Joseph by his brothers in Acts 7:9-10.

TRANSLATION - 37:12-17:

12 Then his brothers went to pasture the flock of their father in Shechem. **13** Then Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing in Shechem? Go, and I will send you to them." And he said, "Here I am." **14** Then he said to him, "Go, please. See peace of your brothers and peace of the flock and bring back a word." And he sent him from the valley of Hebron and he came to Shechem. **15** And a man found him wandering in the field and the man asked him, saying, "What are you seeking?"

16 And he said, "My brothers I myself am seeking. Announce, please, to me where they are pasturing." **17** Now the man said, "They broke camp from here because I heard [them] saying, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and he found them in Dothan.

WORDS:

GRAMMAR:

“Go” (verse 13) is an imperative. “Bring back” (verse 14) is a *hiphil*, a causative verb. “Wandering” (verse 15) is a participle. “Am seeking” (verse 16) is a participle. “Announce” is an *hiphil* imperative.

ARCHAEOLOGY:

From Hebron (verse 14) to Shechem, it is just over 50 miles (80 km). Dothan (verse 17) will be another fourteen miles (21 km). The whole trip would have taken Joseph about four, maybe five, days. Joseph is following a typical caravan route from Gilead down to Egypt.

COMMENTS:

While the brothers were pasturing their flocks at Shechem, Jacob (is he naive too?) sends Joseph, alone, to see about his brothers. Jacob wants Joseph to see about the “peace” (welfare) of his brothers. It would take a few days for Joseph to reach Shechem, but when he did, he could not find his brothers. It was fortuitous that a stranger saw Joseph wandering in the field, who informed Joseph that he overheard the brothers talking about taking the flocks to Dothan. Dothan was higher in the hill country where the fields would be better grazing for the flocks. Joseph traveled about another day to arrive at his brothers.

This paragraph has slowed down the action as it builds suspense anticipating what is about to happen. Joseph is walking toward his brothers, with apparently pure motives, while they are plotting his death...

APPLICATION:

Contemporaries in the text - Joseph has no concept of what his brothers are capable of doing and seems to be naive about their feelings. He is simply fulfilling his father’s request - wearing his favorite tunic in the process (vs 23).

TRANSLATION - 37:18-30:

18 Then they saw him from a distance and before he approached to them and they acted cunningly against him to kill him. **19** Then a man said to his brothers, “Behold, the master of dreams is coming. **20** Even now, he is coming. Let us murder him and let us cast him into one of the cisterns and let us say, “An evil animal devoured him.” And let us see what will be with his dreams.”

21 Now Reuben heard and he delivered him from their hand and he said, “Let us not strike a soul.” **22** So Reuben said to them, “Do not shed blood. Throw him to this cistern which [is] in the desert and a hand, do not stretch out against him” because to deliver him from their hand to bring back to their father.

23 It was, just as Joseph came to his brothers that they stripped of Joseph his tunic, the tunic with sleeves which [was] on him. **24** Then they took him and threw him into the cistern and the cistern [was] empty; there was not in it water. **25** They sat down to eat bread and they lifted their eyes and saw and behold a caravan of Ishmaelites were coming from Gilead and camels were carrying resin and balm and myrrh; coming to bring [it] down to Egypt.

26 Then Judah said to his brothers, “What gain if we kill our brother and we cover his blood? **27** Go and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites and our hand will not be against him because our brother, our flesh, he [is].” And his brothers listened to him.

28 Then men, Midianites, passed by, merchants, and they pulled him up and brought up Joseph from the cistern and sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty [pieces] of silver and they brought Joseph to Egypt.

29 Then Reuben returned to the cistern and behold there was not Joseph in the cistern and he ripped to pieces his garments. **30** Then he returned to his brothers and said, “The lad, we do not have! And I, where am I coming?”

WORDS:

“To deliver” (verse 21; 213x) means to “rescue, deliver, save.” “To strip” (verse 23; 43x) can mean to strip off clothes or to strip off skin, to flay someone. “To pull” (verse 28; 36x) means to “draw, pull, stretch.” “To rip” (verse 29; 63x) means to “tear or cut up.” “To slaughter” (verse 31) is used 81 times, most in the context of animal sacrifices.

GRAMMAR:

“Acted cunningly” (verse 18) is a *hithpael*. “To kill” is a *hiphil* infinitive. The brothers are creating a scheme, indicated by the series of cohortatives: “Let us murder, let us cast, let us say, and let us see.” “Dreaming one” is a participle of the key verb in the chapter. “To strike” (verse 21) is a *hiphil*. “To bring down” (verse 25) is a *hiphil*.

ARCHAEOLOGY:

“Cisterns” caught rain water for use during the dry season. They were narrow at the top and larger at the bottom. Normally, only pitchers would be lowered into the cistern. Lime would line the walls to waterproof the cistern.

Dothan averages 24”-28” of rain each year. The descendants of Ishmael (16:3, 4, 15) married with the descendants of Midian (25:1-2) so that the two terms could be used interchangeably; see Judges 8:24.

COMMENTS:

The brothers’ anger and jealousy has reached a crescendo and opportunity has now presented itself. They see Joseph coming and they begin devising a plan to kill their brother. They refer to Joseph in verse 19 as the “master” of dreams. The word “master” translates *baal* which can mean “husband” (20:3), “owner” (14:13), or it could refer to the Canaanite god Baal. The brothers are accusing Joseph of being an “expert” in dreams. This designation will be appropriate for Joseph once he arrives in Egypt (chapters 41 & 42). Their plan was to take Joseph, kill him, throw him into a cistern, and then say a wild, ferocious (“evil”) animal killed Joseph. They expect his dreams to come to an end if they kill the dreamer. Of course, once we have read the whole story, we know that they are simply assisting the dreams to come true (cf. 50:20)!

Reuben, the oldest son, decides to try to save Joseph. He had lost his father’s respect when he slept with Bilhah (35:22); perhaps this is his effort at redemption. Reuben’s idea is to keep them from committing murder, shedding blood. In reality, Reuben hoped to save Joseph and return him to Jacob.

When Joseph arrived in the camp, the brothers seize him, strip him of the hated tunic, and throw him into the cistern. Apparently they were at the end of the summer season as the cistern was dry, which helped preserve Joseph from drowning. Indicative of the callousness, the brothers sit down to eat bread. In the meanwhile, they see a caravan of Ishmaelites coming their direction, traveling from Gilead to Egypt. The Ismaelites were carrying goods that could be used for spices, fragrance, and medicine.

Judah then speaks up with his own idea. Judah’s idea was to sell their brother into slavery in Egypt. He agrees with Reuben not to shed blood and “cover” Joseph’s blood so no one will know. Otherwise, they would receive the vengeance of their father and, perhaps, other relatives. After all, he is their flesh. The other brothers were in agreement with Judah’s new plan.

The traders were glad to pay twenty pieces of silver for a new slave and they were on their way and the brothers were twenty pieces of silver wealthier; two pieces of silver each.

Reuben had been gone, perhaps pasturing some flocks elsewhere, and return to the cistern to find Joseph was gone. In exasperation, he asked his brothers what he would do since the boy was gone? Reuben's cry sounds poetic in the Hebrew language as he uses a series of "a", "i", and "nah" sounds. As the oldest brother, he would be held accountable. The brothers will later admit (42:21) they ignored Joseph's cries from the pit.

APPLICATION:

Contemporaries in the text - Joseph was actually screaming from the pit, to deaf ears. Now he realizes what his brothers would do as a result of their anger and jealousy.

Contemporaries of Moses - Kidnapping was a crime punishable by death under the law of Moses (Exo. 21:16; Deut. 24:7). The price for Joseph was the price under the law of Moses (Lev. 27:5).

Later Hebrew writers - Slave trading was common in the ancient world (Exek. 27:13; Joel 3:4-8; Amos 1:6, 9).

NT writers - Perhaps Jesus has in mind the brother's betrayal of the favored son in His parable in Matthew 21:33-46. We mentioned above, Stephen summarizes the treatment by the brothers of Joseph in his sermon in Acts 7:9-10.

TRANSLATION - 37:31-35:

31 So they took Joseph's tunic and slaughtered a male goat and female goats and dipped the tunic in their blood. **32** So they sent the tunic with sleeves and brought it to their father and said, "This we found. Investigate, please, the tunic, your son's this [is] or not." **33** So he investigated it and he said, "The tunic of my son! An evil animal has devoured him, to tear it has torn Joseph! **34** Then Jacob tore his garment and put sackcloth on his thighs and mourned over his son many days. **35** Then all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him but he refused to be comforted and he said, "I will go down to my son, a mourner, to Sheol." And his father wept over him.

WORDS:

"To mourn" (verse 34; 36x) means to "mourn, lament." "Sheol" (verse 34; 65x) refers to the unseen world, the underworld. There is not a conception of hell as is found in NT teaching. This is the place of the dead. We have simply transliterated the Hebrew word. The origin of the word is not known and there are no related words in other Semitic languages.

GRAMMAR:

"Investigate" (verse 32) is a *hiphil* imperative. "To tear it has torn" (verse 33) is the infinitive absolute with the perfect tense of the same verb, an emphatic construction. "To mourn" (verse 34) is *hithpael* as well as the second "to be comforted."

ARCHAEOLOGY:

"Sackcloth" (verse 34) was made of coarse goat or camel hair, worn as a sign of mourning, and was very uncomfortable, especially in hot climates.

COMMENTS:

In an ironic twist, Joseph's tunic is dipped in the blood of slaughtered goats in order to deceive Jacob. Jacob had deceived his own father through the use of slaughtered goats (27:9). Observe the sons do not actually tell a lie about killing Joseph. They bring the tunic to their father's attention and tell him they found it. Then they encourage Jacob to investigate it, to determine if the tunic was Joseph's.

Jacob investigated the tunic and then jumped to the conclusion that the sons hoped he would. A wild, savage, ferocious (“evil”) animal had devoured Joseph. As an act of mourning, Jacob tears his own garment and puts on sackcloth. Since clothes were handmade in that culture and it would take considerable time to make the garments by hand from start to finish, tearing clothes was a great sacrifice. Then, Jacob put on the garment of sadness, sackcloth. This is the only time sackcloth is found in Genesis. Then Jacob mourned for his favorite son, many days. His sons, daughters, and grandchildren (perhaps) tried to comfort Jacob but he refused to be comforted. We only know of Dinah among possible daughters. The word might refer to granddaughters.

In his mourning, Jacob says he will go, as a mourner, into the unseen world (“Sheol”) to be with his son. That is, he will mourn until he passes from this physical life. Jacob’s comments make a strong argument that the patriarchs believed in life after death. Jacob believed he would see his son again.

APPLICATION:

Contemporaries in the text - The sons lie that they “found” the tunic but beyond that, they simply present the blood-soaked tunic to their father and ask if it is his son’s. Notice how impersonal they present the possibility: “your son,” rather than “our brother.” They do not even use his name.

Contemporaries of Moses -

Later Hebrew writers - Others will put on sackcloth as an act of mourning (2 Kings 6:30; 19:1; Neh. 9:1; Esther 4:1; Isa. 37:1; Jer. 4:8; 6:26. God will condemn sowing discord among brothers in Proverbs 6:19.

NT writers -

TRANSLATION - 37:36:

36 Then the Midianites sold him to the Egyptians, to Potiphar, eunuch of Pharaoh, the prince of the bodyguards.

ARCHAEOLOGY:

The term “eunuch” was likely no longer used literally.

COMMENTS:

Moses brings us up-to-date with Joseph before he gives us an account from the life of Judah (chapter 38). The Midianites sold Joseph into servitude to Potiphar, a servant of Pharaoh, and chief of his bodyguard.

APPLICATION:

Contemporaries in the text - Joseph has come a long way in a short period of time, as a 17 year old! But when Moses picks back up with Joseph in chapter 39, we will see that Joseph’s faith has only grown stronger in God.

Contemporaries of Moses -

Later Hebrew writers -

NT writers -