



Genesis - Chapter Thirty Seven

II. Genesis 11:27-50:26 - Patriarchal History (continues)

Summary of Chapter Thirty Seven

Trouble continued for Jacob's family even though they were now settled in the land of Canaan. Jacob favoured his son Joseph over all the others, causing them to be jealous. To make matters worse, Joseph would recount dreams to his brothers indicating that he would become their master one day.

The brothers were tending the flocks several days journey away from home and Jacob sent Joseph to see how they were doing. The brothers saw this as an opportunity to rid themselves of this source of irritation and decided to kill him. However, the eldest brother Reuben intervened and Joseph was not killed. Instead, the brothers sold him to some Ishmaelites on their way to Egypt and so Joseph became the slave of Potiphar, but the brothers presented Jacob with false evidence of his death.

II.c Genesis 37:1-50:26 - Jacob's Descendants

The last main section of Genesis further develops the theme of a regal line descended from Abraham. While royalty is initially ascribed to Joseph, and is later linked to his younger son Ephraim, future kingship is also associated with the line of Judah. As immediate heir to the patriarchal promises, Joseph, the governor of Egypt, mediates divine blessing to many people. Genesis, however, anticipates a time when the leadership of Israel will pass from the tribe of Ephraim to the tribe of Judah: <<***He rejected the tent of Joseph, he did not choose the tribe of Ephraim; but he chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which he loves***>> (Psalm 78:67-68). This story serves the first readers by explaining how they came to be in Egypt, namely, through God's mysterious use of evil and noble deeds to bring about his purpose, as confirmed by Genesis 50:20.

II.c.i Genesis 37:1-36 - Joseph Goes Into Slavery

Joseph is the second youngest son of Jacob. But his father bestows on him privileges normally given to the firstborn. Joseph's royal dreams further antagonise his older brothers, who cannot accept that he will reign over them. When the opportunity presents itself, they sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt.

II.c.i.1 Genesis 37:1-11 - Joseph Dreams of Greatness

Jacob's favouritism of Joseph raises tensions within the family and his brothers start to hate him for it. Matters are made worse when Joseph explains two dreams to his brothers that indicate he will one day rule over them.

¹ Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. ^{2a} This is the story of the family of Jacob.

Genesis 37:1-2a

These verses provide a transition from Esau's family to Jacob's. Whereas Esau's descendants dwell in Seir alongside the Horites, **Jacob** settles in **Canaan** as did his father Isaac.

This is the story of the family of Jacob. This marks the start of the last toledoth in the Book of Genesis, focusing particularly on the account of Joseph and how God used him to find a safe haven in Egypt, which would allow the Hebrew nation to become established as a people in their own right.

^{2b} Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father.

Genesis 37:2b

Joseph, being seventeen years old. The account will go on to show that Joseph would spend the next twelve or thirteen years either as a slave or in prison: <<*Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh, and went through all the land of Egypt*>> (Genesis 41:46).

Thus begins one of the remarkable life stories of the Bible and all literature. Boice wrote: "He was loved and hated, favoured and abused, tempted and trusted, exalted and abased. Yet at no point in the one-hundred-and-ten-year life of Joseph did he ever seem to get his eyes off God or cease to trust him. Adversity did not harden his character. Prosperity did not ruin him. He was the same in private as in public. He was a truly great man." Enoch shows the walk of faith, Noah shows the perseverance of faith, Abraham shows the obedience of faith, Isaac shows the power of faith, and Jacob shows the discipline of faith. Along

these lines it could be said that Joseph shows the triumph of faith. Joseph never complained and he never compromised. Joseph is also a remarkably powerful picture of Jesus.

As well as shepherding the flock, Joseph was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, showing that he may have had a tendency to remain at home just as his father had done as a young man: <<*When the boys grew up, Esau was a skilful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents*>> (Genesis 25:27). This characteristic probably endeared him to his father more than did the characteristics of his brothers. However, the account of the young David shows that it was not uncommon for the younger brother to serve his older siblings: <<*Jesse said to his son David, 'Take for your brothers an ephah of this parched grain and these ten loaves, and carry them quickly to the camp to your brothers; also take these ten cheeses to the commander of their thousand. See how your brothers fare, and bring some token from them'*>> (1 Samuel 17:17-18).

Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. Joseph's action not only alienates him from his brothers but implies that his behaviour is more righteous than theirs, something largely borne out by future events. This is not a case of malicious gossip but of a man dutifully bringing factual accounts to the attention of the head of the family.

³ Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. ⁴ But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

Genesis 37:3-4

Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children. As previously indicated, Joseph is Jacob's favourite because he was the first son to be born to his beloved Rachel; refer to the comment made on 33:1-3.

The son of his old age. Since Benjamin is actually the last son born to Jacob, the unusual Hebrew expression son of old age (there is no explicit word for 'his' in the Hebrew text) may denote someone who displays exceptional maturity while still young or perhaps the son closest to Jacob in his old age. Jacob may have recognised Joseph's leadership potential early in life.

A long robe with sleeves. The Hebrew expression used to denote this cloak is used elsewhere only of a garment worn by King David's daughter Tamar: <<*Now she was wearing a long robe with sleeves; for this is how the virgin daughters of the king were clothed in earlier times.*>> So his servant put her out, and bolted the door after her>> (2 Samuel 13:18). The actual design of the cloak is

uncertain, however, it was a long flowing garment worn by people of high status, unlike the shorter garments worn by traditional workmen.

Other translations are based on the understanding of the Septuagint translators use of the Greek *poikilos* meaning 'many-coloured'. However, the NRSVA prefers to use a robe with sleeves, as confirmed by the text of 2 Samuel 13:18, which uses the same Hebrew expression.

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

Genesis 37:5

Joseph had a dream. Although it is not specified here, in Genesis dreams are normally associated with divine revelations, for example 20:3, 28:12, 31:10-11, 40:5-8, and 41:1.

They hated him even more. Joseph demonstrated a distinct lack of tact when recounted his dreams to his brothers. Jealousy of the favouritism shown to Joseph (v.4) leads to division and deep animosity within Jacob's family. However, God planned this for good, as Stephen recounted: <<*The patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him, and rescued him from all his afflictions, and enabled him to win favour and to show wisdom when he stood before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who appointed him ruler over Egypt and over all his household*>> (Acts 7:9-10).

Jacob, it seems, had brought trouble on his family from the outset. The deception of his father Isaac and taking his brother's birthright were just the start. By not dealing with the disputes between Rachel and Leah, and by accepting their maids as his concubines, Jacob ruled over a dysfunctional family who would become the patriarchs of God's chosen people. This is not the way a mere human account of a dynasty would have been told, which helps to authenticate that God had his hand on them all along, even as they made a mess of their lives. Yet: <<*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose*>> (Romans 8:28).

⁶ He said to them, 'Listen to this dream that I dreamed. ⁷ There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf.' ⁸ His brothers said to him, 'Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?' So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words.

Genesis 37:6-8

Listen to this dream that I dreamed. Joseph seems to have been afflicted with the sort of pride often apparent among the favoured and blessed. He was so

focused on how great his dreams were for him, he did not begin to consider how the dreams would sound in the ears of others. At this point, Joseph was a contrast to Jesus. Jesus wants people to be as he was on this earth: an others-centred person. Joseph seems to have fallen short in this area of his life.

Joseph's brothers intuitively interpret Joseph's first dream as indicating that he will reign over them, something later fulfilled in his rule over Egypt. The dream adds to the brothers' jealous hatred of Joseph, for his father has already dressed him in special attire.

⁹ He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, 'Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.' ¹⁰ But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, 'What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?' ¹¹ So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

Genesis 37:9-11

He had another dream. The second dream reinforces the expectation that Joseph will exercise authority over the rest of his family, including his father represented by the sun, and his brothers, who are the eleven stars. This dream links to the revelation received by John of Israel's battle with Satan, with the birth of the Messiah seen as the only hope of victory: <<***A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth***>> (Revelation 12:1-2).

Although Joseph was wrong to tell these dreams, they certainly did come true. One may receive a wonderful message from God that he does not intend them to publish to others. Joseph showed a lack of wisdom here perhaps rooted in his pride as apparently being blessed over others.

Shall we indeed come, I and your mother. When Joseph had this dream, his mother Rachel was already dead (35:16-19); therefore, it is likely that your mother refers to Leah, who would have taken over responsibility for all family matters as the sole wife of Jacob. While Joseph's brothers later bow down to him in Egypt, there is no specific mention of his parents' doing this, although possibly his father did so in 47:28-31. It is noted that Joseph did bow before his father as he presented his own son's Ephraim and Manasseh to their grandfather for a blessing as recorded in Genesis 48:11-13.

His father kept the matter in mind. Jacob knew that his other sons were jealous of Joseph but he took no direct action.

II.c.i.2 Genesis 37:12-36 - Joseph Is Sold by His Brothers

His brothers were away tending to the flocks and Jacob sent Joseph to see how they were doing, instructing him to report back. As he approached them, his brothers plotted to kill them but Reuben persuaded them to take him captive instead. When they saw a group of Ishmaelite traders approaching they sold Joseph to them as a slave and he was taken to Egypt and resold to Potiphar. Meanwhile, his brothers soaked his distinctive garment in blood and reported his death to their father, claiming he was killed by a wild animal.

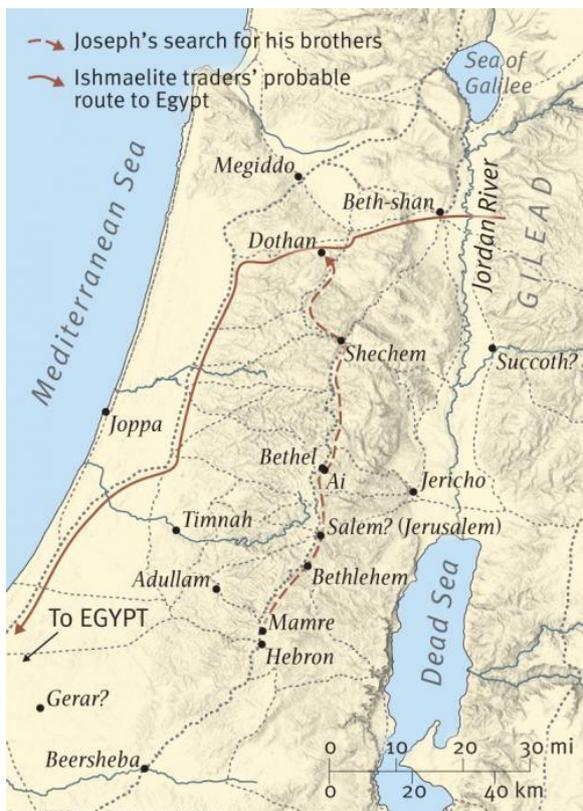
¹² Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem.

¹³ And Israel said to Joseph, 'Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.' He answered, 'Here I am.' ^{14a} So he said to him, 'Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me.' So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.

Genesis 37:12-14a

His brothers went to pasture their father's flock. Joseph's brothers have taken the family flocks northward from Hebron to find better pasture.

Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me. Refer back to the comment on v.2b which shows that Jesse made a similar request of David when three of his brothers were away with King Saul fighting the Philistines.



Shechem was the first place named in connection with Abraham's arrival in Canaan (12:6), and was the place where Jacob's sons killed all the men because Dinah was raped (34:25-29).

Jacob sent Joseph from Hebron to Shechem to find his brothers, who had been pasturing their father's flock. When Joseph arrived, he learned that his brothers had gone on to Dothan, so he went there and found them. His brothers threw him into a pit and later sold him to some Ishmaelite spice traders on their way from Gilead to Egypt. The traders took Joseph to Egypt and sold him to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard.

^{14b} He came to Shechem, ¹⁵ and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, ‘What are you seeking?’ ¹⁶ ‘I am seeking my brothers,’ he said; ‘tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock.’ ¹⁷ 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.

Genesis 37:14b-17

Since his brothers have moved farther north, Joseph travels from Shechem to Dothan, a journey of about 16 to 20 miles or 26 to 32 km, in order to find them.

Dothan was the place where Elisha was when the king of Aram tried to capture him. God’s support for Elisha led to the withdrawal of the Aramæan army from Israel (2 Kings 6:8-23).

¹⁸ They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. ¹⁹ They said to one another, ‘Here comes this dreamer. ²⁰ Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.’

Genesis 37:18-20

They conspired to kill him. Fratricide is one of the most depraved aspects of fallen humanity and is highlighted in Genesis, refer to 4:8 and 27:41. Yet God would ultimately protect Joseph from coming to any real harm: <<*The wicked plot against the righteous, and gnash their teeth at them; but the LORD laughs at the wicked, for he sees that their day is coming*>> (Psalm 37:12-13).

Here comes this dreamer. The brothers’ comment is full of sarcasm; the Hebrew expression implies the master or owner of the dreams.

Let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. The pits mentioned here would have been water cisterns, although it is likely this one would have been dry for they would not have wanted to pollute a source of water that they and their flocks would need. Jeremiah too was thrown into just a cistern as this: <<*So they took Jeremiah and threw him into the cistern of Malchiah, the king’s son, which was in the court of the guard, letting Jeremiah down by ropes. Now there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud*>> (Jeremiah 38:6).

²¹ But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, ‘Let us not take his life.’ ²² Reuben said to them, ‘Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand

on him' – that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father.

Genesis 37:21-22

Reuben, the eldest of the brothers, argues against killing Joseph, so that he might restore him to his father. Reuben possibly hopes to regain his father's favour so that he will be confirmed as the firstborn, refer to the comment made on 35:22-23, or perhaps Reuben has no other motive than to show mercy to Joseph. Unknown to Reuben, his plan is undermined when his brothers sell Joseph to passing traders. When he later returns to get Joseph, he is not there (v.29).

²³ So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; ²⁴ and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

Genesis 37:23-24

They stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore. This garment symbolised the special favour that Jacob always showed to Joseph. His brothers must have taken particular pleasure in stripping it off of him.

Although they showed no remorse here, they would later acknowledge the sin in their actions: <<*They said to one another, 'Alas, we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother; we saw his anguish when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen. That is why this anguish has come upon us'*>> (Genesis 42:21).

²⁵ Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt.

Genesis 37:25

They sat down to eat. This underlines the callousness of the brothers, who have just thrown their brother into a pit. Things would be different when Joseph was a gracious host of a meal for them: <<*Portions were taken to them from Joseph's table, but Benjamin's portion was five times as much as any of theirs. So they drank and were merry with him*>> (Genesis 43:34).

A caravan of Ishmaelites. These traders, who originate from the Sinai Peninsula, are travelling south in the direction of Egypt. Although they are initially identified as Ishmaelites, a broad category covering various people groups, in v.28 and v.36 they are designated more specifically as Midianites.

Coming from Gilead, which lies to the east of the Jordan River, several hundred miles south of Paddan-aram, a recognised trade route from Arabia into Egypt.

Some biblical scholars have maintained that the mention of camels in Genesis is anachronistic, on the assumption that they were not domesticated until about 1100 BC. Archaeological finds of camel bones, however, suggest that some camels were in use by humans as early as the 3rd Millennium BC. While the evidence is limited, it is hardly surprising, given the use to which camels were put. In Genesis they usually appear in passages that involve long-distance journeys through or close to deserts

Apparently selling people into slavery in this way was a known activity in the region. For example, one Ugaritic text, from the 14th Century BC, tells of a man in Syria being sold by his comrade to a passing caravan of Egyptians, who stripped him of his goods and abandoned him.

²⁶ Then Judah said to his brothers, ‘What profit is there if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? ²⁷ Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.’ And his brothers agreed.

Genesis 37:26-27

Judah said to his brothers. Although Judah exhibits compassion by not wanting to kill Joseph, and he may have been seeking any possible solution he could find to save Joseph’s life, his proposal may have been motivated by greed as he sees an opportunity to make a profit from the sale of his brother.

²⁸ When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

Genesis 37:28

Twenty pieces of silver. Mesopotamian documents from the early 2nd Millennium BC reveal that the price of slaves ranged from 15 to 30 pieces or shekels, with 20 shekels being the value in the Hammurabi Code. Jesus would be sold, not into slavery but to trial and death for the higher price: <<*Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, ‘What will you give me if I betray him to you?’ They paid him thirty pieces of silver*>> (Matthew 24:14-15).

At any given time in the history of Egypt there was a significant substratum of slaves. Many of these were captives of war, but there was also a large slave trade. So many of the slaves came from Asia, especially Canaan, Mesopotamia, Hatti, Syria, that the word Asiatic became synonymous with slave.

²⁹ When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes. ³⁰ He returned to his brothers, and said, ‘The boy is gone; and I, where can I turn?’

Genesis 37:29-30

He tore his clothes. This was a visible sign of intense anguish and pain, often linked to mourning: <<When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went through the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry>> (Esther 4:1); <<When King Hezekiah heard it, he tore his clothes, covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of the LORD>> (Isaiah 37:1), <<Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, ‘Why do we still need witnesses?’>> (Mark 14:63), and: <<When the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting, ‘Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them>> (Acts 14:14-15).

Where can I turn? Reuben’s grief and despair might centre not on the loss of Joseph himself but on his own lost opportunity to regain his father’s favour as commented on in vv.21-22. He also sensed the sorrow it would bring upon his father when they reported that Joseph was gone.

³¹ Then they took Joseph’s robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. ³² They had the long robe with sleeves taken to their father, and they said, ‘This we have found; see now whether it is your son’s robe or not.’ ³³ He recognised it, and said, ‘It is my son’s robe! A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.’

Genesis 37:31-33

Jacob’s deception by his sons, using Joseph’s cloak and a slaughtered goat, mirrors the way Jacob had deceived his own father by using Esau’s cloak and two goatskins in order to pass himself off as Esau in order to receive the blessing of a firstborn son (27:15-16).

A wild animal has devoured him. The story ensured that Jacob would not try to recover his son’s remains for a proper burial. Thus his mourning would be all the heavier upon his heart. His sons were truly callous in their actions.

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

Genesis 37:34

Put sackcloth on his loins. This was a common custom associated with mourning. Other examples in scripture include: <<*Then David said to Joab and to all the people who were with him, ‘Tear your clothes, and put on sackcloth, and mourn over Abner.’ And King David followed the bier*>> (2 Samuel 3:31), <<*Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads*>> (Nehemiah 9:1), <<*Then I turned to the LORD God, to seek an answer by prayer and supplication with fasting and sackcloth and ashes*>> (Daniel 9:3), <<*Put on sackcloth and lament, you priests; wail, you ministers of the altar. Come, pass the night in sackcloth, you ministers of my God! Grain-offering and drink-offering are withheld from the house of your God*>> (Joel 1:13), <<*And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth*>> (Jonah 3:5), <<*Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes*>> (Luke 10:13), <<*And I will grant my two witnesses authority to prophesy for one thousand two hundred and sixty days, wearing sackcloth*>> (Revelation 11:3).

³⁵ All his sons and all his daughters sought 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 bewailed him.

Genesis 37:35

He refused to be comforted. No words could be found to relieve the grief that Jacob felt for the loss of his favourite son: <<*In the day of my trouble I seek the LORD; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted*>> (Psalm 77:2).

I shall go down to Sheol. The report of Joseph’s death causes Jacob to believe that his grief will continue through the afterlife. **Sheol** is the proper name for the place where people go after death, although solid knowledge about the afterlife was lacking at this time.

³⁶ Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard.

Genesis 37:36

Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard. Potiphar holds an important position in the royal court. The precise nature of his post is not known, apart from the fact that he had responsibility for the imprisonment of senior members of the king’s staff; refer to the comment made on 40:2-3. This factor will become important later when Joseph is incarcerated in the king’s prison.