Genesis 37

Verses 1–4: The Story of Joseph

Starting in Genesis 37, the stories about the family of Jacob come to predominantly focus on Joseph (verse 2), so chapters 37–50 are often referred to as "the Joseph story" by scholars. Judah also plays a key role in these chapters; thus these stories reflect the later prominence that the tribes of Judah and Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh) would hold in both the united and divided Israelite kingdoms.[1]

Gary Rendsburg argued that the whole Joseph story is organized as a chiasm, with the moment when Joseph revealed himself to his brothers in Egypt as the climactic focal point:

A Joseph and his brothers; Jacob and Joseph part (37:1–36)
  B Interlude: Joseph not present (38:1–30)
    C Reversal: Joseph guilty, Potiphar's wife innocent (39:1–23)
      D Joseph hero of Egypt (40:1–41:57)
        E Two trips to Egypt (42:1–43:34)
          F Final test (44:1–34)
      Focal point: Joseph reveals himself to his brothers (45:1–4)
          F Conclusion of test (45:1–28)
        E Two tellings of migration to Egypt (46:1–47:12)
      D Joseph hero of Egypt (47:13–27)
    C Reversal: Ephraim first-born, Manasseh second-born (47:28–48:22)
  B Interlude: Joseph only nominally present (49:1–28)
A Joseph and his brothers; Jacob and Joseph part (49:29–50:26)[2]

1 Dennis T. Olson, "Genesis," in *The New Interpreter's Bible: One Volume Commentary*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gavanta and David Peterson (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), 27.

2 Gary A. Rendsburg, "Chiasmus in the Book of Genesis," in *Chiasmus: The State of the Art*, ed. John W. Welch and Donald W. Parry (Provo, UT: BYU Studies; Springville, UT: Book of Mormon Central, 2020), 25, fig. 3.

The story of Abraham was primarily set in Canaan, while much of the Jacob narrative took place in northern Mesopotamia. The story of Joseph, however, is primarily set in Egypt and provides more detailed descriptions of the foreign culture and customs than are seen in other stories about the patriarchs.[3] Many of these details accurately reflect ancient Egyptian culture, customs, and even literary motifs.[4]

As with the stories of Abraham and Jacob, the main point of the narrative is to illustrate how God is going to bless the family of Abraham—even through trying circumstances that would seem to derail rather than promote the fulfillment of God's promises (see 45:7; 50:20).[5] The story also continues the theme of favoring a younger son over his older brother (or brothers). What is different in this story is the *open parental favoritism* that Jacob shows to Joseph, which leads to jealousy on the part of Joseph's brothers and creates the conflicts that set this story in motion (37:3–4).

Jacob signaled his preference toward Joseph by giving him "a coat of many colours" (verse 3). The Hebrew for "coat of many colours" is a rare expression, *ketonet passim*, and scholars are uncertain of its exact meaning.[6] Other translations give "a long robe with sleeves" (New Revised Standard Version), "an ornate robe" (New International Version), "a special tunic" (New English Translation), or "a robe with long sleeves" (Lexham English Bible), among other variations. As one scholar noted, "The garment that Jacob gave to Joseph seems to have been a special garment, but what distinguished it is now obscure to us."[7]

Verses 5–11: Joseph's Dreams

Dreams and their interpretation are central to the Joseph story, and this section has the first of three pairs of dreams that are key to the narrative (compare 40:5–23; 41:1–36).[8] In this instance, Joseph is the dreamer and his family does the interpreting. "Throughout the biblical world, dreams were recognized as vehicles of divine communication,"[9] and thus not knowing their meaning could induce considerable anxiety—as will be

3 Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis through Rabbinic Tradition and Modern Scholarship* (New York, NY: Melton Research Center, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1966), 212.

4 James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996), 83–95.

5 Gordon J. Wenham, "Genesis," in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 64.

6 Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 212.

7 John Gee, "Clothes and Cups: The Tangible World of Joseph," in *From Creation to Sinai: The Old Testament through the Lens of the Restoration*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap and Aaron P. Schade (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2021), 428.

8 Olson, "Genesis," 28.

9 Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 212.

seen later with the dreams of Pharaoh's servants in chapter 40 and of Pharaoh himself in chapter 41—because it potentially meant that the dreamer lacked knowledge vital for their future or well-being.[10]

Yet, people in antiquity also understood that sometimes, dreams are just dreams, which is why dreams in the Joseph story always occur in pairs: the second served to authentic the first as a legitimate message from God.[11] Dreams were also believed to reveal something about the personality and innermost desires of the dreamer. Hence, here when Joseph's dreams indicated that he would rule over the rest of his family, his brothers believed the dreams "betrayed [Joseph's] true aspirations." They also feared "the potentiality of fulfillment," which is why the dreams "arouse[d] hostility so intense as to culminate in a conspiracy to murder."[12]

Verses 12–22: Jacob's Sons Conspire to Kill Joseph

While Israel's sons were out tending to the flocks, Israel sent Joseph to check up on them (Genesis 37:12–17). "The road led from Hebron to Shechem and on to Dothan, where Joseph finally caught up with his brothers. This route corresponds exactly to the ancient north-south road west of the Jordan which traversed the central hill country the entire length of the Palestinian watershed."[13] This led Joseph some fifty miles away from the safety of home and into the arms of his brothers, who were conspiring to kill him.[14] However, the oldest son Reuben persuaded the brothers to instead cast Joseph into a pit, at least for the time being (verses 18–22).

Verses 23–36: Joseph Sold into Slavery

While Reuben was apparently away, Judah proposed another alternative: selling Joseph as a slave to a passing merchant caravan (Genesis 37:26–29). The twenty-shekel price was the average price for a slave in the early second millennium BC and was equal to about two to three years of wages for a hired shepherd.[15] Unfortunately, selling family members into slavery was not an uncommon practice in the ancient world.[16]

10 Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 213.

11 Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 213; Olson, "Genesis," 28.

12 Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 213.

13 Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 213–214.

14 Wenham, "Genesis," 64–65.

15 Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 83–84; Wenham, "Genesis," 65.

16 Gee, "Clothes and Cups," 428.

The merchants then took Joseph down to Egypt, where he was sold to a man named Potiphar (verse 36). Documents from this general time period show that many slaves in Egypt were of Semitic origin.[17] The name Potiphar is an authentic Egyptian name, most popular in the first millennium BC but based on a name type that goes back much earlier.[18]

When the brothers cast Joseph into the pit, they stripped him of his special coat (verses 23–24). In various ways, major transitions in Joseph's life were marked by the receiving and then the taking away of clothing. In this instance, he transitions from being a favored son with a special coat or garment to being a lowly slave, stripped of clothing.[19] Afterward, the brothers take the coat, dip it in blood, and probably tear it as well,[20] and present it to their father in order to make it look like a wild animal had attacked and devoured Joseph (Genesis 37:31–35).

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17 Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 214.

18 Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 84–85.

19 Olson, "Genesis," 28.

20 Gee, "Clothes and Cups," 429. Compare Alma 46:23.