

Joseph the Dreamer (Gen. 37:1–11)

By Jacob D. Gerber

Genesis 37:1 properly belongs as the final word to complete the previous chapter, where we read of the “generations of Esau” (Gen. 36:1). Genesis 36 recounts the extensive spread of Esau’s descendants throughout the land of Seir as the fulfillment of God’s prophecies. To Rebekah, the Lord promised that Esau would become a nation and a people (Gen. 25:23)—although Jacob’s nation and people would be stronger Jacob. Then, through Isaac’s blessing, God promised Esau that he would have a dwelling, but, unlike Jacob, Esau’s dwelling would be away from the fatness of the earth and from the dew of heaven (Gen. 27:39). Although Jacob was not without his deep flaws, Esau’s mind is set exclusively on earthly things, for he is a “man of the field” (Gen. 25:27). Jacob may have deceived, but Esau willingly traded away the heavenly promise of Isaac’s birthright to satisfy the urges of his belly (Gen. 25:34), and Esau forfeited Isaac’s heavenly blessing by marrying Canaanite and Ishmaelite women, whom God had specifically excluded from the promises (Gen. 26:34–35; 28:6–9). Genesis 36, therefore, traces out the growth of Esau’s earthly enrichment. This enrichment demonstrates God’s grace in blessing him by giving him what he wants. Nevertheless, we now see the result: Jacob alone continues to dwell in the land of his father’s sojournings, in the land of Canaan (Gen. 37:1).¹ By God’s grace, Jacob alone will be the recipient of the heavenly promises.

As the focal point of the narrative shifts from Jacob to Jacob’s sons, we read of one more division in the household of the holy family. Joseph is on one side, with all of his brothers against him, on the other. Ultimately, the hatred of Joseph’s brothers will lead to a lengthy, painful, circuitous journey that will lead Joseph to become the second most powerful person in the world, as well as the world’s savior through his management of a famine crisis. This first part of the story, then, gives us critical background to help us understand the brothers’ deep hatred against Joseph. While Jacob’s favoritism does Joseph no favors in the eyes of Joseph’s brothers, the biggest problem arises from Joseph’s words—first, a bad report that he brings against his brothers (v. 2), and second, two dreams that portray his whole family bowing down to him (v. 5–10). These are not merely dreams, however, but revelation from God himself. In this chapter, we see an initial warning about Joseph’s righteousness in the face of his evil brothers: *don’t shoot the Lord’s messenger*.

Favored Son (Genesis 37:1–4)

We should also see the contrast between Esau and Jacob regarding what they possessed. Where

¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King, vol. 2 (Reprint: Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 258. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.xv.i.html>>

Jacob lived “in the land of Canaan,”² Esau lived in a land named after himself: Edom (Gen. 36:1, 8, 16–19, 21, 31, 32, 43). Jacob still only *dwells* in the land of his father’s *sojournings*, and does not yet possess it. Where Esau possessed kings, tribes, and land, Jacob possesses only a promise.³ Nevertheless, Jacob (like Abraham and Isaac before him) lives by faith that God would indeed fulfill his promises one day.⁴ And, now that Esau has departed, Jacob alone remains in the promised land. As John Calvin writes, “Although in appearance he did not obtain a single clod; yet, contented with the bare sight of the land, he exercised his faith.... Therefore, though by the removal of his brother to another abode, Jacob was no little gainer; yet it was the Lord’s will that this advantage should be hidden from his eyes, in order that he might depend entirely upon the promise.”⁵

With Esau set aside, the narrative refocuses back on the holy family: “These are the generations of Jacob” (Gen. 37:2a). This phrase does not mean that the subsequent story will focus exclusively on Jacob, for the word “generations” really means something more like “family history.”⁶ As a family history, the narrator intends to show the outcome of *all* Jacob’s children, but especially Joseph, who is directly juxtaposed against Jacob: “These are the generations of Jacob. Joseph....”⁷ Immediately, the narrative gives us important background information focused exclusively on Joseph. Even the scant information we receive about the other brothers only informs us about their attitudes and actions as they relate to Joseph.

To start, the text puts us right in the middle of the action, where Joseph is in the process of “shepherding.” The word order of this phrase in Hebrew runs like this: “...[Joseph] was shepherding with his brothers the flock...” (Gen. 37:2b). As Victor Hamilton points out, the phrase “shepherding with his brothers” could equally mean “shepherding his brothers,” where “shepherding” is a word related to ruling over someone else (e.g., 2 Sam. 5:2; 7:7).⁸ This play on words is almost certainly not accidental, since this story recounts Joseph’s dreams predicting that he will indeed reign over his brothers some day (v. 8, 10). In some sense, Joseph is already shepherding his brothers!

Joseph specifically is shepherding with/over Dan and Naphtali, the sons of Bilhah, and Gad and Asher, the sons of Zilpah (cf. Gen. 35:25–26). About these brothers, Joseph brings a “bad report” to Jacob, their father (v. 2c). The word “bad” is the word for “evil,” and, indeed, Joseph’s brothers will soon devise evil against him.⁹ When they pretend to kill Joseph, they blame the fictitious attack on an “evil” (ESV: “fierce”) animal (Gen. 37:20, 33). Ultimately, though, whatever “evil” Joseph’s

² Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, NAC, vol. 1B (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 660.

³ Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 588.

⁴ John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 206.

⁵ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, vol. 2, 258. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.xv.i.html>>

⁶ Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, WBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 345.

⁷ Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 665.

⁸ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 392.

⁹ Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis*, 598.

brothers intend against him, the Lord intends it for good (Gen. 50:20).¹⁰

There are two main interpretive questions surrounding this evil report. First, was Joseph's report true? The word for "report" appears again later in the Pentateuch to describe the "report" that the spies of the land of Canaan bring back to the Israelites in the wilderness in Numbers 13:32 and 14:36–37. From this, some commentators interpret this word as implying that the report is *untrue*.¹¹ This is possible, but it is probably better to simply understand the word "report" as referring to a disparaging or denigrating report.¹² After all, the report of the faithless spies in Canaan was denigrating, but it was not actually false. Joshua and Caleb corroborate that report by affirming that there were indeed terrifying enemies in the land. The difference of Joshua and Caleb is not in any denial of enemies, but in their exhortation to trust the Lord, who was giving them the land (Num. 14:6–9). The second question is, Should Joseph have made this report at all? Derek Kidner puts the answer well: "Joseph's *evil report* of his brothers must not be judged by the criterion of group solidarity. The narrative, as usual, makes no comment; it leaves it at least presumable that Joseph's first duty was to his father: cf. the obligation to testify in Leviticus 5:a1."¹³ Consistent with the rest of this story, Joseph is portrayed as behaving honestly and uprightly, even when his integrity would be costly.

Jacob exacerbates the evil hatred of Joseph's brothers by showing preferential treatment to Joseph, especially in giving Jacob a special coat (v. 3–4). Although Jacob had suffered much because of the favoritism of his father, Isaac, for his brother, Esau (cf., Gen. 25:28), Jacob prefers Joseph over the others.¹⁴ The text tells us that Jacob preferred Joseph because "he was the son of his old age" (v. 3), although undoubtedly Jacob's preference for Rachel, Joseph's mother, must certainly have played into this as well (cf. Gen. 29:30).¹⁵ While the coat has been traditionally translated as having "many colors," it is probably better to understand that this coat has long sleeves reaching to the wrists and ankles, a garment fit for royalty (cf. 2 Sam. 13:18).¹⁶ Regardless, the coat was a unmistakable sign of Jacob's preference for Joseph over the others.

Joseph's brothers react to this coat first by interpreting its meaning ("that their father loved him more than all his brothers") and by responding with hatred and harsh speech toward Joseph (v. 4). This is one of the many places in the Old Testament—and in Genesis particularly—where the phrase "and _____ saw that..." and then provides a reaction. Sometimes the reaction is of judgment as when God saw that his creation was good (cf. Gen. 1:31), or when Eve saw that the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was "good for food" (Gen. 3:6). Other times, the text tells us of the action taken in reaction to what they see, as when the sons of God see that the daughters of men are attractive, so they "took as their wives any they chose" (Gen. 6:2). Here, the text emphasizes the

¹⁰ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary*, 206.

¹¹ e.g., Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 350.

¹² Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 688.

¹³ Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, 192.

¹⁴ Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, 192.

¹⁵ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary*, 206.

¹⁶ Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis*, 598.

first *affective* (emotions that draw us *toward* or *away* from someone/something) response of hatred.¹⁷ Second, the text provides an *active* response of violent speech (“they could not speak peacefully to him”). A deep division surrounding Joseph is already appearing, with the great love for Joseph on Jacob’s side, and the great hatred for Joseph on his brothers’ side.¹⁸

Faithful Prophet (Gen. 37:5–8)

The hatred of Joseph’s brothers would not come exclusively from the actions of Joseph or of Jacob. They “hated him even more” because of prophetic dreams Joseph received from the Lord (v. 5). The phrase “hated him even more” in both v. 5 and 8 is a play on words. That phrase might more literally be translated as, “and they *added* [וַיִּזְסִיפוּ; *wayyōsiphū*] again to hate him,” where Joseph’s name (יֹסֵף; *yōsēph*) means, “may he *add*” (Gen. 30:24). Joseph’s first dream is unusual in at least two ways. First, Joseph and his brothers are shepherds (v. 2; cf. Gen. 47:3), but this dream has to do with gathering sheaves of grain.¹⁹ By the grain, however, the dream foreshadows Joseph’s critical role later in life by preserving life throughout the world during a seven year famine.²⁰ Second, God has communicated previously in Genesis through dreams, but those dreams included words (e.g., Gen. 20:3–7; 28:12–15), while this dream only includes images.²¹

Nevertheless, the brothers instantly perceive the meaning of the dream: they are the sheaves of grain doing the bowing, and Joseph is the upright sheaf of grain to whom they will bow. Just as Joseph has already been “shepherding” them (v. 2), so they will eventually bow down to him. They may protest with strong language now: “Are you indeed to reign [תִּמְלֹךְ תִּמְלֹךְ; *hāmālōk timlōk*; lit., ‘reigning will you reign’] over us? Or are you indeed to rule [תִּמְשֹׁל תִּמְשֹׁל; *māshōl timshōl*; lit., ‘ruling will you rule’] over us?” (v. 8). Eventually, though, Joseph will rule (Gen. 45:8, 26), and his brothers will bow down to him (Gen. 42:6; 43:26, 28).²² Grammatically, the construction in these questions uses an infinitive absolute plus the imperfect form of the same verb, translated with “indeed to reign/rule.” This construction expresses a particularly strong sentiment, which only heightens the irony when these events come to pass. From this, the brothers hate Joseph all the more “for his dreams and for his words” (v. 8). It is always the case that God’s favor toward his chosen people will inflame the rage of the rest of the world (1 John 3:12–13).²³

¹⁷ For more on the “contrary affection” of hatred, see Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections* (Reprinted Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2007; First Published, 1746), 32, 47.

¹⁸ “To capture the significance of this animosity, a study of the verbs “to love” (*‘āhab*) and “to hate” (*śānē*) is essential. They describe active emotions, choosing and rejecting, and responding favorably to and acting in hostility against.” (Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis*, 599.)

¹⁹ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 352.

²⁰ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 410.

²¹ Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis*, 596.

²² Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary*, 206.

²³ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, vol. 2, 262. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02/calcom02.xv.i.html>>

Full Consideration (Gen. 37:9–11)

After this, Joseph dreamed another dream. In this dream, Jacob is the sun, Joseph's mother is the moon, and Joseph and his brothers are stars. and all the heavenly hosts bow down to Joseph (v. 9). Very clearly, the dream has the same meaning as the first, although with a wider significance that encompasses Joseph's parents as well as his brother (v. 10). Why, then, does Joseph receive two dreams? The answer to this question probably comes a bit later in Joseph's story, when Pharaoh of Egypt also dreams two dreams. When that happens, Joseph explains the significance of doubled dreams this way: "And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about" (Gen. 41:32). This sense of giving double confirmation to the prophecy that Joseph's family would bow down to him seems to apply to Joseph's dream as well.²⁴

Who, though, is Joseph's "mother," represented by the moon (v. 10)? We have already read of the death of Joseph's biological mother, Rachel (Gen. 35:19). Since Genesis does not always relate everything in chronological order, it is possible that this story takes place before Rachel's death, but this is unlikely.²⁵ It is probably better simply to see the presence of the moon as filling out the overarching message: that Joseph will arise to ascendancy above *all* his family, living or dead.²⁶

Jacob's comments are interesting. First, he rebukes Joseph, asking questions like Joseph's brothers had asked in v. 8. This time, however, the repeated word (infinitive absolute plus imperative) is *come*: "Shall I and your mother and your brothers *indeed come* [הָבֹא נָבוֹא; *hăbô' nabô'*] to bow ourselves to the ground before you?" (v. 10). This emphasis foreshadows the way in which the entire family will indeed eventually *come* to Egypt, leaving the promised land behind (cf. Gen. 42:6; 44:14; 46:1, 6, 7–8, 26–28). As Joseph's brothers will do precisely what they reject strongly here, so also will Jacob by coming to Egypt.

Second, though, Jacob does not dismiss Joseph's dream entirely. Joseph's brothers are jealous of Joseph, but Jacob "kept the saying"—that is, he kept the saying in mind. On this point, Derek Kidner writes, "The two attitudes in this verse are those that always divide people in their reactions to news from God. The brothers' scepticism was emotional and hasty; the father's open mind was the product of some humility. Israel had learnt by now, as his sons had not, to allow for God's hand in affairs, and for his right of choice among men."²⁷ Everywhere we are called to receive the things of God eagerly, even when receiving those things must significantly humble our pride.²⁸ Indeed, in the New Testament, Stephen will be martyred for pointing to Joseph's suffering as foreshadowing Christ's own suffering and rejection at the hands of his brethren (Acts 7:9–16). Again, Derek Kidner wisely writes, there is "a human pattern that runs through the Old Testament to culminate at Calvary: the

²⁴ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary*, 207.

²⁵ "It is clear that Genesis does not relate everything in strict chronological order, especially deaths (cf. ...11:32 and 24:65–66; 25:1–4). But the presence of eleven stars seems to imply Benjamin's existence, so it would seem more likely that Rachel is assumed to have died and that the moon is included just to complete the picture of the heavenly bodies...." (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 352.)

²⁶ John H. Walton, *Genesis*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 664.

²⁷ Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, 193.

²⁸ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, vol. 2, 262–64. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02/calcom02.xv.i.html>>

rejection of God's chosen deliverers, through the envy and unbelief of their kith and kin—yet a rejection which is finally made to play its own part in bringing about the deliverance.”²⁹

Discussion Questions

- 1) How does this passage set up the Joseph story as a whole? What happens here that explains the great hatred of Joseph's brothers for him, leading them eventually to sell him into slavery and to fake his death to their father? What features lead us to recognize that Joseph will one day reign and rule over his brothers? How does the text foreshadow the ultimate movement of the nation of Israel (Jacob and his sons) to Egypt to set up the Exodus story?
- 2) How does this text portray Joseph as a faithful prophet for the Lord? Where do we see him faithfully declaring the truth? How do we see him suffer for his faithfulness? Where are you tempted to shrink back from faithfully sharing the word of the Lord with other people around you? What fears keep you from the kind of faithfulness that Joseph exhibits? What where one difficult area where you need to speak the truth this coming week, in spite of the suffering it may bring?
- 3) What kind of reactions do Joseph's brothers experience when they hear Joseph declaring the message that the Lord had revealed to Joseph in his dream (v. 4)? How do their affections and their actions reveal the condition of their hearts? How have you responded recently when you are confronted with hard truths from God's word? What is your initial, gut reaction? What have you done in response? Do your actions line up with faith and obedience? If not, why?
- 4) How is Jacob's reaction to hearing Joseph's second dream similar to the reaction of Joseph's brothers? What does it mean, though, when we read that Jacob “kept the saying in mind” (v. 11)? How does Jacob's willingness to continue considering the prophetic revelation revealed to Joseph portray Jacob's faith? How might we continue to “keep in mind” hard sayings in mind by pondering over the parts of God's word that we find difficult? How does Romans 12:2 instruct us toward this goal?

²⁹ Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, 191.