

## Study: The Joseph Story

**Text:** Genesis 37: The Early Days of Joseph (37:1–36)<sup>1</sup>

Welcome to our inductive study of the Joseph Story, which runs from Genesis 37 through 50. In this study you will be asked questions that are intended to get you *into the text*, observing what is here in God’s word, thinking about what it means, and asking what its implications are. These are the three major steps of inductive Bible study: observation, interpretation, and application.

I want to encourage you to use this study for your personal weekly Bible study, so that you come to each Sunday morning having thought prayerfully and deeply about these things. It will enrich your time together each class meeting. However, even if you are not able to complete the study questions, please come to the ABF meetings anyway and learn as you listen and interact in those times. Better to have *some* study in the word together rather than none at all!

Finally, for each passage that we cover each week, I’d like to encourage you to read through the passage at least four or five different times (maybe once a day Monday through Friday, before you work through your questions for the day). Part of becoming a good student of the Word is not only getting yourself into the Word, but also getting the Word into you. Repeated reading of the same portion of Scripture will help to fix the contents into your minds and allow you more easily to go back to those places when you need to recall them later. Happy studying!

### I. Setting & Title (37:1-2a)

A. Acc. to 37:1, where does Jacob dwell? Who is the *father* that is mentioned here?

B. Concerning the language of 37:2, “These are the generations of Jacob,” K. Mathews writes the following:

The title is the standard *tōlēdōt* introduction that announces the major sections of Genesis (see vol. 1A, pp. 35–41). Wenham correctly notes that 37:2–50:26 concerns all the sons of Jacob, although in the history of Israel the Judah and Joseph tribes

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<sup>1</sup> The outline of the passage we are following basically follows the outline provided in K. A. Mathews, [Genesis 11:27–50:26](#), vol. 1B, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), 82.

figure prominently. The ancestors of Joseph’s descendants (Ephraim and Manasseh) in the north and Judah in the south maintain the spotlight (Mathews, 685).

## II. Joseph the Dreamer (37:2b–11)

### A. Joseph’s Coat of Favor (37:2b–4)

1. What is Joseph’s age and task when this narrative opens (v. 2)?

2. In v. 2, mention is made of two *wives* of Joseph’s father. The background to a statement like this comes from Gen 29:29 – 30:24 and 35:16 – 18. Review these passages and fill in the table below, using the top row for the names of women who gave birth to Jacob’s children, and then placing the children’s names in the proper column. Number the children by birth order.



3. At the end of v. 2 we are told of a specific action that Joseph takes in relation to his brothers. What does he do? What are we told about what the brothers think about this?

4. Finally in v. 2, notice the possessive pronoun used with the expression “to their father.” The text could just as well have said “to his (Joseph’s) father.” Why do you think Moses might have included this detail?

5. V. 3 introduces some background information that helps us make sense of the brother’s attitude towards Joseph in v. 4. *What* do we learn is Jacob’s disposition

toward Joseph? *Why* does Jacob feel this way? *How* does Jacob visibly demonstrate his feeling?

6. For the brothers' part, what are we told in v. 4 of two responses they had towards Joseph.

a. What is their first response? Look back at Gen 29:31, 33: is this a new emotion in Jacob's family?

b. What is their second response?

c. Who puts into place the mechanism by which this hatred grew?

#### B. Joseph's First Dream (37:5–8)

1. In Joseph's first dream, what sorts of objects does he see, and what are they doing? What do you think these things represent? What did his brothers think they represented? Do you think they believed it? *Why* or *why not*?

2. As you may recall, Jacob's family are shepherds, not farmers. So the use of sheaf/sheaves for this dream seems out of place, even striking. *Why* do you think this image is used? (Maybe consider the context of passages like Gen 41:22, 48; 42:5 and how they tie in to the story line.)

3. Look at Gen 43:26, 28; 44:14; 50:18. How do these passages relate to this dream?

4. At the beginning and end of vv. 5-8, what are we told twice about how the brothers feel about this first dream?

### C. Joseph's Second Dream (37:9-11)

1. What objects does Joseph see in his second dream? What are they doing? What do they represent?

2. To whom does Joseph tell this second dream? How do they respond?

3. Note: the very end of v. 11 describes a final response of Jacob to these things. What does he do with the sayings/things? Compare this with Luke 2:19, 51; who else "treasured" or "kept" in mind things that were happening that would affect future times?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting that the LXX (Septuagint) version of Gen 37:11 shares with Luke 2:19, 51 both the same verbal root (*tēreō*, to keep, guard) and the same word as the object of the verb (*rhēma*, word/saying/thing).

### III. The Deceivers (37:12–35)

#### A. Joseph's Search for His Brothers at Shechem (37:12–17)

1. Where does Jacob propose to send Joseph in this segment? How willing to go does Joseph seem? Do either of them sense any danger in doing this? What might that say about Jacob and Joseph?

2. What two-part assignment does Jacob give to Joseph (14)?

Note: There is an irony in the way the Hebrew reads in v. 14. Jacob tells Joseph to “see if it is well with your brothers”; this is literally “*see the shalom* of your brothers.” But, we have already been told in v. 4 that “his brothers *saw* that their father loved him . . . they hated him and could not speak peacefully (for *shalom*) to him.” In other words, Jacob obviously sends his hated son to check for “peace” among brothers who have no ability to speak peace to him!

3. Where does Joseph start out from? Where does he go first? Where does he finally find them? (Can you locate these on a map/atlas?)

#### B. The Deception and Selling of Joseph at Dothan (37:18–30)

1. The Brothers Plot against Joseph (37:18–20)

a. What do the brothers conspire to do to Joseph when they see him coming?

b. What do they explicitly seem to be trying to thwart?

c. How do they intend to cover their crime?

2. Reuben Plots to Rescue Joseph (37:21–22)

- a. Which brother intervenes to try to save Joseph's life?
  
- b. What specific reason is given for why this particular son would try to divert the brothers from their intent to murder? Can you think of any reason that he would try to do this for his father? (See Gen 35:22 for a possible motive.)
  
- c. K. Mathews points out that "Reuben's verbiage is a solemn echo of 9:4-6 (. . . cf. Num 35:33), which calls for the sternest reprisal for murder. The brothers are the horrid 'Cain's' of the Jacob family (4:9)" (Mathews, 696). What exactly is it in Reuben's language that reflects Gen 9:4-6?

### 3. The Seizure of Joseph (37:23-25)

- a. What visible form of humiliation do the brothers enact upon Joseph when they seize him?
  
- b. Throughout the Joseph story the theme of clothing, and the relationship of investiture to status, plays a prominent role. How do the following passages connect the presence (or lack) of clothing with someone's social status?

Gen 37:3

Gen 37:23

Gen 39:12-13 (what does the stripping of Joseph's garments lead to here?)

Gen 41:42

Gen 45:22 (how does this compare with 37:23?)

4. Judah Urges the Sale of Joseph (37:26–28)

- a. Who did the brothers see coming toward them, and where were they going?
- b. Who proposes that they not kill Joseph after all?
- c. Judah provides two motivations here, one rather crass and commercial, and the other somewhat compassionate. What are the two reasons for not killing Joseph? Is this noble on Judah's part?

5. Reuben Mourns Joseph's "Death" (37:29–30)

- a. The text does not indicate how Reuben and the brothers are separated, but apparently Reuben is not present when Joseph is sold to the Midianite traders. How does he respond upon seeing that Joseph is gone?
- b. Where is Reuben in the birth order of Jacob's sons? What about Judah? Whose plan carries weight with the rest of the brothers? What does this tell you about Reuben's moral authority/leadership at this point?

C. The Deception and Mourning of Jacob at Hebron (37:31–35)

1. What was the ruse that the brothers decided to use with their father? What kind of animal was used in the deception?
2. There is a striking irony with Jacob being deceived here by his sons, when throughout his own life he has deceived others. Specifically, consider the former episode in Gen 27:15–16, 22–23, 27. Who deceived whom? At whose expense? How are these things similar to the present deception foisted upon Jacob?

3. It has been suggested that the brothers showed cowardice in the interaction with their father. First, acc. to v. 32, how do they convey the robe to the father?<sup>3</sup> Second, what specifics do they offer about what happened to Joseph?

4. How does Jacob respond to this tragedy? What do the sons attempt to do about it? What do you think would be going on within their consciences during such an attempt at comfort over a loss they themselves were responsible for?

#### IV. Conclusion (37:36)

A. Who did the Midianites sell Joseph to? How was he related to the Pharaoh?

B. Discussion questions:

1. What do you learn about humanity from this passage?

2. What do you learn about God from this passage?

3. Does this “holy family” seem like it can function as the channel of blessing to all the nations of the earth (Gen 12:1-3; 26:4; 28:14)?

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<sup>3</sup> By “sending it” they appear to avoid facing Jacob on his initial encounter with the bloody robe. By merely asking him to recognize the robe, they leave it to Jacob to infer what happened rather than telling the lie.