

THE JOSEPH STORY

Genesis 37 to 50

[*You are encouraged to read the biblical text before you read this commentary.*]

Even though Genesis 37 to 50 is called the Joseph Story, it should be noted that these chapters continue the story of Jacob. Genesis 48 to 50 returns to the final days of Jacob.

On a *human* level, these chapters of Genesis are the story of how one man moved from rags to riches. On a *divine* level, it is a story of how Providence uses the evil designs of humans to further God's plan of salvation.

These chapters have been likened to that of the Wisdom literature. "Joseph is presented as a typically wise man whose humility in the exercise of power, forgiving spirit, and fear of God reflects the ideal for all of Israel" (JBC, p.37). Let us now turn to chapter 37 which begins the Joseph story and continues the Jacob story.

CHAPTER 37: Joseph goes to Egypt

"Israel (i.e. Jacob) loved Joseph best of all of his sons, for he was the child of his old age; and he made him a long tunic" (v. 3).

This chapter tells us why Joseph's brothers were jealous of him and why they wanted to get rid of him.

- Joseph brings Jacob "bad reports" about some of his brothers (37:2).
- Jacob favors Joseph and makes him a very special tunic, sometimes called the "coat of many colors" (37:3). This is one more case of God's mysterious choice of a younger brother over the first-born.
- Joseph has dreams which are seen as a manifestation of the future. The first dream (37:6-7) foretells his rise to power in Egypt. The second dream includes Joseph's parents (the "sun" and the "moon") in an act of worship. Sharing these dreams with his brothers made them hate him all the more (37:8).

The brothers plot to get rid of Joseph (37:12-26).

One day when Joseph, wearing the beautiful coat that speaks of his father's partiality, goes out to the fields to check on his brothers, they are overcome with rage. They plan to kill him and then tell their father that his death has been caused by a wild animal. The brothers

strip Joseph of his coat and throw him into a dry cistern. However, on seeing a caravan of Ishmaelites, they instead decide to sell Joseph to them for twenty pieces of silver. Some passing Midianite traders pull Joseph out of the cistern and take him off to Egypt (37:28). The brothers then return home with Joseph's bloodied coat and report to their father that an animal has killed their brother. Jacob is overcome with grief and refuses to be consoled. In Egypt, Joseph is resold to Potiphar, a courier of Pharaoh (37:36).

Pause: Why might parents favor one child over another? If Joseph had been your brother, how would you have dealt with him?

CHAPTER 38: Judah and Tamar

"She is more in the right than I." (38:26)

This chapter is seen by scholars as an interruption to the Joseph story. It concerns one of Joseph's brothers, Judah, and his daughter-in-law, Tamar. "The inclusion of the story here is interpreted as an explanation of the origin of the tribe of Judah, an important tribe in Israel's history and from which may be traced the genealogy of Jesus" (JBC p.38; Mt 1:1-6).

As we study this chapter, we should also read Deuteronomy 25:5-10 which explains what is called "levirate marriage," whereby a widow marries her deceased husband's brother. In our story, Judah marries out of the family by taking for himself a Canaanite woman, Shua. Together they have three sons: Er, Onan and Shelah. Er, the first-born, marries Tamar which offends the Lord in some way, and he dies (38:6).

Deaths that occur without children are bad news for both the deceased and his widow. Without an heir, a man's name dies with him and the legal rights to his inheritance could be in question. The widow would probably have to return to her father's house and would most likely become a burden. To remedy this situation, the practice of "levirate marriage" (levir is Latin for "brother-in-law") was put in place. It became one's duty to marry the widow of his deceased brother. The first son of this marriage was regarded as the legal son of his deceased uncle and therefore entitled to his deceased uncle's inheritance and, even more importantly, he carried on the name of the deceased brother. The levirate marriage would also

benefit the widow. (See Deut 25:5-10 which describes this custom in more detail, and the harsh punishment dealt out on those who refused to marry their brother's widow.)

Back to our story. When Er dies, Tamar becomes a widow without a child. Hence, Judah tells Er's brother Onan to "unite with your brother's widow, in fulfillment of your duty as brother-in-law and thus preserve your brother's line" (38:8). While Onan obeys his father's order, he refuses to complete the sexual act since he knows that the children to be born of the marriage will not be counted as his. Onan has no desire to help either his brother or his sister-in-law. Onan dies because he has failed to fulfill his obligation for his brother's widow. After losing two sons, Judah is hesitant to give his third son to Tamar, thus renegeing on his responsibility to both his first son and his widowed daughter-in-law.

Consequently, Tamar takes matters into her own hands (38:14-29). Disguised as a harlot, she tricks her father-in-law into having intercourse with her. When she is found to be with child, Judah plans to have her burned in punishment for what he believes is an act of harlotry. When Tamar provides proof that it is Judah himself who has impregnated her, he relents and acknowledges: "*She is more in the right than I am*" (38:26). Tamar actually gives birth to twins. One of them, Perez, will be an ancestor of the great king David (see Ruth 4:18-22).

Pause: What spoke to you most in this chapter? What are some of the challenges we face in dealing with extended family?

CHAPTER 39: The rise and fall of Joseph

"The Lord was with Joseph in prison and showed him his faithful love...and caused everything he did to succeed. (39:21, 23)

Upon his arrival in Egypt, Joseph is sold as a slave to an Egyptian named Potiphar. The narrator mentions several times that despite Joseph's status of slave, the Lord was with him and, as a result, he did well wherever he went. In a short time, Joseph becomes the personal attendant of Potiphar, a high-ranking official in Pharaoh's court.

Potiphar's wife is very attracted to the handsome Joseph and wants to lie with him (39:7). Joseph refuses her sexual advances because to give in is a sin against God and his master. Enraged with Joseph's

lack of cooperation, she accuses him of sexual misconduct and prevails upon her husband to throw Joseph into jail (39:17-20). While in jail, Joseph again rises to prominence and a position of trust. His successes are attributed to God (39:23).

Pause: Joseph is the victim of sexual harassment by Potiphar's wife. Why do some men and women sexually harass others in the work place? It has been said: "Tough times never last, tough people do." How does this saying fit Joseph?

CHAPTER 40: Joseph interprets the prisoner's dreams

Joseph said to them: "Surely, interpretations come from God. Please tell the dreams to me" (v. 8).

While in prison, the very ability that got Joseph into trouble with his brothers, now serves him well. He interprets the dreams of the Pharaoh's jailed cupbearer and chief baker, and within three days, his interpretation of the dreams comes true, i.e., death of the chief baker and reinstatement of the royal cupbearer to his former job. Joseph asks the cupbearer to seek his release but the cupbearer, after being freed from jail, forgets all about him, until Pharaoh himself dreams. Thus Joseph remains in jail for two more years.

CHAPTER 41: Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dreams

"It is not I," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God who will give Pharaoh the right answer." (41:16)

Pharaoh has two dreams which none of his wise men can interpret. The cupbearer suddenly remembers Joseph's ability to interpret dreams. After Joseph is cleaned up, he is brought to Pharaoh's court where he tells Pharaoh that his dream interpretation comes from God. Joseph then proceeds with his interpretation which, by the end of the chapter, has proven to be true (41:53-57). Pharaoh's dreams foretell of seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine. He is so impressed by Joseph's interpretation that he puts him in charge of the food collection during the seven years of plenty. Joseph, the slave, becomes the second most important man in Egypt (41:38-44).

Joseph is completely drawn into the royal court (41:45-52). He is given an Egyptian name, Zaphnath-paneah ("God speaks and lives"). His new name indicates his new role. He marries an Egyptian woman and fathers

two sons: Manasseh (“God made me forget” – all the bad times) and Ephraim (“God has made me fruitful”).

The years of famine impacted not only Egypt but the whole world, and all looked to Egypt for help (41:53-57).

Pause: Do you believe that God can communicate to us in dreams? In a time of plenty, do you tend to save for a rainy day?

CHAPTER 42: Joseph’s brothers come to Egypt

“The brothers said to one another, ‘Alas, we are being punished because of our brother. We saw the anguish of his heart when he pleaded with us, yet we paid no heed; that is why this anguish has now come upon us.’” (42:21)

Jacob hears that Egypt is rationing grain. He shows impatience as his sons “gape at one another” (42:1). So he sends them off to Egypt to fetch some grain. Ten brothers go, but Benjamin, his youngest son, born of Rachel (as was Joseph), is kept behind. Joseph’s dreams in 37:5-10 are fulfilled when his brothers bow before him (42:6). He recognizes them, but they do not recognize him. Joseph then puts them to the test to see if they have changed. He accuses his brothers of being spies and orders them to go home and return to Egypt with Benjamin. Simeon is held as a hostage. Joseph wants to see if they have the same hatred for Benjamin that they had for him. The brothers are struck with terror believing that they are being punished for the horrible thing they have done to Joseph (42:21-23).

When they return to their father and share the Egyptian’s demand, Jacob says: “Must you make me childless? Joseph is gone, and Simeon is gone, and now you would take away Benjamin. Why must such things always happen to me?” (42:36).

CHAPTER 43: The brothers return to Egypt

“With that, Joseph had to hurry out, for he was so overcome with affection for his brother that he was on the verge of tears. He went into a private room and wept there” (43:30).

The tension begun in chapter 42 intensifies in chapters 43-44 until it is resolved in chapter 45.

Jacob (also called Israel) tells his sons to return to Egypt for more grain. But Judah tells him that it is futile to go without Benjamin. Finally, Jacob consents

and sends them off with gifts hoping to placate the Egyptian official. Before they depart, Jacob invokes a blessing: “May God almighty dispose the man to be merciful toward you...” (43:14).

The brothers successfully return to Egypt and receive a royal treatment (43:15-34). When Joseph’s eyes fall on Benjamin, his full brother, he is overcome with emotion and goes to a private room to weep (43:29-30).

CHAPTER 44: Joseph’s brothers’ final test

“If the boy is not with us when I go back to your servant, whose very life is bound up with his, he will die as soon as he sees that the boy is missing” (44:30).

Joseph puts his brothers to a second test to see if they have really changed. Joseph’s special silver goblet is placed in Benjamin’s bag without him knowing it. The goblet is thought to have supernatural powers and to steal it is a serious crime.

After the brothers leave, Joseph sends his head steward after them and accuses them of stealing the silver goblet. The brothers are shocked and vow that the guilty one will die (44:9). When the goblet is found in Benjamin’s bag, the brothers tear their clothes – an expression of deep sorrow. They are terrified that harm would come to their father’s favorite son.

The brothers return to Egypt for a very tense meeting with Joseph (44:14-36). Judah, as the spokesperson, gives a very impassioned speech, admitting guilt (44:16) and pleading to take Benjamin’s place. He fears that their father, who is still grieving the loss of his youngest son (Joseph), would die if Benjamin is not returned to him. Judah’s offer convinces Joseph that his brothers have truly changed. He who was ready to kill Joseph some years ago is now ready to offer himself in place of Benjamin. The brothers who earlier were so indifferent to their father’s grief now show great concern for their father.

Pause: “Real guilt when repressed makes us sick. When faced and dealt with, it leads to a healing of the soul.” Comment.

CHAPTER 45: Joseph reveals himself to his brothers

“Do not reproach yourselves... God has sent me ahead of you.” (45:5)

Joseph reveals himself to his brothers. *“I am your brother Joseph whom you once sold into Egypt.”* After the brothers recover from the shock of Joseph’s revelation, he says to them: *“...Do not reproach yourselves for having sold me here. It was really for the sake of saving lives that God sent me here ahead of you.”* (45:5). The Collegeville Bible Commentary states: *“The underlying theology of the Joseph story is made explicit. God has directed and guided the course of events. What the brothers meant as evil, God has redeemed. God is the one who sent Joseph to Egypt to preserve a remnant and to deliver Jacob’s family. The terms ‘remnant’ and ‘deliverance’ (45:7) become important Old Testament terms expressing Israel’s conviction that God intervenes in its history and preserves it from total destruction.”* (p.75; see also Catechism 312).

Joseph and his brothers have an emotional reconciliation (45:14-15). The tension that has been building up since chapter 42 is finally resolved.

The brothers return home and break the good news to their father (45:21-29). *“He was dumbfounded”* (45:26) and says *“My son Joseph is still alive. I must go and see him before I die”* (45:28).

CHAPTER 46: Jacob and his family migrate to Egypt

On their way to Egypt, Jacob’s family passes by Beersheba where Isaac once had a revelation from God. Now Jacob has his own revelation. The God of his ancestors reveals himself and reassures Jacob that he will be with him in Egypt.

They story is resumed in verse 28. Verses 29 and 30 describe the emotional meeting between Jacob and his son Joseph whom he believed was dead.

Joseph plans to use his diplomatic skills to have Jacob and his family and herds settle in Goshen (46:31-34).

CHAPTER 47: Jacob meets Pharaoh and settles his family in Goshen

Pharaoh said to Joseph, “They may settle in the land of Goshen; and if you know any of them to be qualified, you may put them in charge of my own livestock” (v. 5)

The meeting between Pharaoh and Joseph’s brothers goes very well. Not only does Pharaoh give them Goshen as a place to settle, he also suggests that they be put in charge of royal herds.

Joseph’s economic policies during the period of famine enable the Egyptians to survive only by selling their land to Pharaoh and becoming his slaves (47:13-26). The Israelites grow in number and prosper in the region of Goshen (47:27).

When Jacob is nearing death, he makes his sons swear to take him out of Egypt and to bury him with his ancestors in Canaan (47:29-31). For Jacob, burial in Canaan represents a claim to the land and anticipates the day of his descendants’ return from Egypt.

CHAPTER 48: Jacob adopts and blesses Joseph’s sons

When Joseph brought his sons close to Jacob, he kissed them and embraced them (v. 11). . . Then he blessed them . . . (v. 15).

Joseph comes to visit his ailing father with his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. Jacob recalls the theophany (God appearing to him) he had at Luz (renamed Bethel) where the twofold blessing of land and many descendants was made (48:3-4); thus giving meaning to his adoption of Joseph’s sons, i.e., they will share the same promises by legal right. The order of their naming in verse 5 reverses that of verse 1, which is intended to be a subtle indication of the pre-eminence of Ephraim. Ephraim and Manasseh would become fathers of tribes with the same status as those of Jacob’s sons. Their adoption also explains why both tribes prospered and why Ephraim was the stronger of the two.

Jacob says that Manasseh and Ephraim “shall be mine” (48:5). The sons sitting on their grandfather’s knees (48:12) signifies that they belong to Jacob.

Joseph prepares his sons to receive their grandfather’s solemn deathbed blessing (48:13). He is careful to position Manasseh on Jacob’s left side so that he will be blessed with his *right* hand, for the right hand is more powerful in blessing than the left.

“But Israel (Jacob) crossing his hands, put his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, although he was the younger, and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, although he was the first born.” (48:14)

When Joseph notices that his father’s right hand was on Ephraim, he thinks his dying father has made a mistake and he tries to remove the hand (48:17-18). But Jacob resists for he knows exactly what he is doing.

In his blessing (48:15-16), Jacob invokes the God of Abraham and Isaac, thus establishing a link between the God worshipped by his ancestors and the God he worships. The blessing promises numerous descendants and a glorious future for the tribes represented by Joseph's sons.

CHAPTER 49: Jacob speaks about the future of the twelve tribes

Though 49:1-27 is generally titled "Jacob's blessings," it really is not a blessing. Rather, the editor has Jacob speaking about the future of the tribes. Also, these verses are considered an interruption to the flow of the story which continues in verse 28.

49:3-4 explains why the tribe of *Reuben* disappeared early as an independent tribe. In 49:5-7, *Simeon and Levi* are cursed because of their violence against those who raped Dinah (Gn 34). 49:8-12 talks about the tribe of *Judah*. The leadership and power of this tribe are declared (49:8-9) and a messianic oracle is added (49:10-12).

The tribe of *Zebulum* will dwell near the sea (49:13). The tribe of *Issachor* is made fun of for allowing itself to be lured by the fertile plain, only to become slaves of the Canaanites (49:14-15). The tribe of *Dan* is praised for establishing justice in its own territory (49:16). The tribe of *Gad* will successfully defend itself against raiding bands of nomads (49:19). The tribe of *Asher* occupies a fertile region (49:20). The saying about Naphtali is obscure. 49:22-27 concern Joseph and only in these verses do we find a blessing of one of the tribes. The poem ends by praising the tribe of Benjamin for its might (49:28).

Jacob's death and burial (49:28 – 50:14). After saying farewell to each of his sons, he asks that he be buried with Abraham and Isaac and their wives. Joseph and his brothers carry out their father's last wish and give him what looks like a royal burial.

Plea for forgiveness (50:15-23). Upon their father's death, the brothers fear retaliation from Joseph for their cruel treatment of him. So in the name of their father (50:17) they go seeking mercy, even offering to be slaves. In response, Joseph says: "Have no fear." And then Joseph underlines God's designs in his story: "Even though you meant harm to me, God meant it for good, to achieve his present end, the survival of many people. Therefore, have no fear. I will provide for you and for your children" (50:19-20).

Pause: Joseph's story is a perfect example of God drawing good out of bad. Can you name a painful event in your life from which God brought something good.

Joseph calls together his brothers and reviews with them the history of God's provident actions (50:24-26). His final words about the land of promise are significant. They indicate that though this story ends in a foreign land, the promise given by God to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will be fulfilled. Joseph's final request is that his bones be taken back to the land of promise (see Ex. 13:19).

When did the Patriarchs live? It is very difficult to know with any certainty when the founding fathers and mothers of Israel lived. Many scholars believe that it was the latter part of the Middle Bronze Age (2000-17000 BC).

Pause: What part of the Joseph story spoke to you most? Why?

Conclusion

In its concluding remarks on Genesis, *The Collegeville Bible Commentary* states: "In the Book of Genesis we have moved from the moment of creation through a history of sin to the call of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob, and finally to Joseph and the tribes in Egypt. In these stories, we have learned of God's relationship to the world and to Israel. We have learned of God as creator, as judge, as redeemer. We have met a God who accepts the weakness of humanity and continues to love, a God who guides and directs, and a God who is able to bring good out of evil. Genesis is only the beginning of the story, the beginning of the acts of Genesis. The story continues not only throughout the Old and New Testaments but in our own lives and our world." (Collegeville Bible Commentary p. 78)