

GENESIS

Chapter 37

Joseph's Dreams

Jacob lived in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan. 2 These are the generations of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was pasturing the flock with his brothers. He was a boy with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives. And Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. 3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors. 4 But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him. 5 Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. 6 He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed: 7 Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf." 8 His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words. 9 Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, "Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, 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 is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?" 11 And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind.

37:1 *Canaan.* Jacob made the promised land his homeland and was later buried there (49:29–30; 50:13). His son Joseph also insisted on being buried in Canaan, which he recognized as the land the Lord had promised to Israel (50:24–25). The Jacob-Joseph cycle begins and ends with references to the land of promise. (CSB)

37:2 *generations.* The word here introduces the tenth and final main section of Genesis. (CSB)

The 10th and last section of the Book of Genesis, each of which is introduced with the term "generations." (TLSB)

Joseph. The author immediately introduces Joseph, on whom the last cycle of the patriarchal narrative centers. In his generation, he, more than any other, represented Israel—as a people who struggled with God and with men and overcame and as a source of blessing to the nations (see 12:2–3). It is, moreover, through the life of Joseph that the covenant family in Canaan becomes an emerging nation in Egypt, thus setting the stage for the exodus. The story of God's dealings with the patriarchs foreshadows the subsequent Biblical account of God's purpose with Israel. It begins with the election and calling out of Abram from the post-Babel nations and ends with Israel in Egypt (in the person of Joseph) preserving the life of the nations (see 41:57; 50:20). So God would deliver Israel out of the nations (the exodus), eventually to send them on a mission of life to the nations (cf. Mt 28:18–20; Ac 1:8). *a bad report about them.* Doubtless about all his brothers (as the later context indicates), not just the sons of his father's concubines. (CSB)

with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah. These sons would have been closer in age to Joseph than the older offspring of Jacob's wife Leah. (TLSB)

bad report. Of something evil they had done. (TLSB)

37:3 *the son of his old age.* Joseph was born to Jacob when he was old, of his favorite wife, Rachel. (TLSB)

he made. Women carded wool and spun thread from wool and from flax. In Egypt, men usually did the weaving, so Jacob may have actually woven Joseph's garment. Later biblical texts describe women weaving (Pr 31:22, 24). (TLSB)

robe of many colors. A mark of Jacob's favoritism, "the kind of garment the virgin daughters of the king wore" (2Sa 13:18). (CSB)

Mentioned elsewhere only at 2Sm 13:18. It became a source of his brothers' envy. (TLSB)

37:5 *dream.* Luther: "So far as dreams are concerned, there is the well-known rule that such revelations must be scrutinized with respect to their relation to the Word and to faith. If they are not in harmony with the Word or destroy faith, they are of Satan" (AE 3:330). Today, we ought not expect God to reveal Himself in dreams, since we have the full revelation of Scripture. (TLSB)

37:7 *binding sheaves.* Like Isaac, Jacob's family was partly nomadic and partly agricultural. At harvest time, the men would tie up the stalks of plants into bundles. (TLSB)

bowed down. Joseph's dream would later come true (42:6; 43:26; 44:14). (CSB)

Years later in Egypt, this dream was fulfilled when Joseph's family bowed down to him. (TLSB)

37:8 *are you indeed to reign us?* Joseph would later become the "prince among his brothers" (Dt 33:16) and receive "the rights of the firstborn" (1Ch 5:2), at least the double portion of the inheritance (see note on 25:5), since his father adopted his two sons (48:5). (CSB)

37:9 *another dream.* Although these dreams were the source of great tension, they would comfort Joseph in his future trials with the knowledge that he was part of God's plan. (TLSB)

37:10 *his father rebuked him.* Knowing that children should honor and serve their parents (Ex 20:12; Dt 5:16), Jacob rebuked Joseph for predicting that he would rule over the rest of the family. (TLSB)

your mother. Jacob possibly refers to Leah, since Rachel has already died (see 35:19). But perhaps the dreams had occurred earlier and are recorded here in the context of the jealousy of the brothers. (CSB)

Probably refers to Leah, Joseph's stepmother, since Rachel had already died (35:19). (TLSB)

bow ... before you. An unsettling echo of a hope expressed earlier to Jacob by his father Isaac (see 27:29). (CSB)

37:11 *kept the saying in mind.* A hint that Jacob later recalled Joseph's dreams when events brought about their fulfillment. Cf. Mary's equally sensitive response to events during Jesus' boyhood days (Lk 2:19, 51). (CSB)

37:1–11 Joseph is favored by his father but hated by his brothers. Joseph's prophetic dreams only raise tensions in the family. We can expect that those who love virtue will be hated and envied by the wicked. Yet we should also pursue humility and avoid arrogance. Thanks be to God, His favored Son died to

redeem His people, though they hated Him. In righteous humility, He redeemed us too. • Almighty God, in this world of division and family strife, bless us with the healing love of Your Son, Jesus. Forgive us our jealousies and hatred. In the Savior's name. Amen. (TLSB)

Joseph Sold by His Brothers

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." And he said to him, "Here I am." **14** So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock, and bring me word." So he sent him from the Valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem. **15** And a man found him wandering in the fields. And 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** And 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. **18** They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him 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 will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams." **21** But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." **22** And Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him"—that he might rescue him out of their hand to restore him to his father. **23** So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore. **24** And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. **25** Then they sat down to eat. And looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. **26** Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? **27** Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers listened to him. **28** Then Midianite traders passed by. And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt. **29** When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes **30** and returned to his brothers and said, "The boy is gone, and I, where shall I go?" **31** Then they took Joseph's robe and slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. **32** And they sent the robe of many colors and brought it to their father and said, "This we have found; please identify whether it is your son's robe or not." **33** And he identified it and said, "It is my son's robe. A fierce animal has devoured him. Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces." **34** Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. **35** All his sons and all his daughters rose up 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 wept for him. **36** Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard.

37:14 *Valley of Hebron ... to Shechem.* C 50 mi through the rocky hills that run along the spine of Canaan, no slight journey for a young man of 17 to venture alone. (TLSB)

37:16 *seeking my brothers.* No doubt word of the presence of a sizable group of men with their substantial flock would circulate in the region, so it is not surprising that the man would know of the brothers' whereabouts. (TLSB)

37:17 *Dothan.* Located about 13 miles north of Shechem, Dothan was already an ancient city by this time. (CSB)

37:18 Joseph could have been identified from afar by his robe of many colors (v 3). (TLSB)

37:19 *dreamer*. The Hebrew for this word means “master of dreams” or “dream expert” and is here used with obvious sarcasm. (CSB)

37:20 *pits*. People dug cisterns to collect rain water. At this time of year, the pit would be dry (v 24). (CSB)

fierce animal. In ancient times, lions and other dangerous animals roamed the region. Cf 1Sm 17:34. (TLSB)

37:21 *Reuben ... rescue him*. As Jacob’s firstborn, he felt responsible for Joseph. He would later remind his brothers of this day (42:22). Initially Reuben’s attempts to influence events seemed successful (30:14–17). But after his arrogant incest with Bilhah (see 35:22 and note) his efforts were always ineffective (see 42:37–38)—demonstrating his loss of the status of firstborn (see 49:3–4). Effective leadership passed to Judah (see vv. 26–27; 43:3–5, 8–10; 44:14–34; 46:28; 49:8–12). (CSB)

37:23–24 Similarly, in Egypt Joseph (though innocent of any wrongdoing) would be stripped of his position of privilege and thrown into prison—also as a result of domestic intrigue (ch. 39). His cloak also would be torn from him and shown to Potiphar, but he would be rescued (41:14). (CSB)

37:25 *sat down to eat*. Detail shows how callous the brothers had become. They ignored the cries and pleas of their brother and were undisturbed by their wicked deed. (TLSB)

Ishmaelites. Also called Midianites (v. 28; see Jdg 8:22, 24, 26) and Medanites. These various tribal groups were interrelated, since Midian and Medan, like Ishmael, were also sons of Abraham (25:2). (CSB)

Gilead. Desert-dwelling descendants of Abraham’s first son, Ishmael. (TLSB)

balm. An oil or gum, with healing properties (see Jer 51:8), exuded by the fruit or stems of one or more kinds of small trees. The balm of Gilead was especially effective (see Jer 8:22; 46:11). (CSB)

Probably the legendary balm of Gilead, which may have been made from terebinth resin. (TLSB)

myrrh. Probably to be identified with labdanum, an aromatic gum (see Ps 45:8; Pr 7:17; SS 3:6; 5:13) exuded from the leaves of the cistus rose. Its oil was used in beauty treatments (see Est 2:12), and it was sometimes mixed with wine and drunk to relieve pain (see Mk 15:23). As a gift fit for a king, myrrh was brought to Jesus after his birth (Mt 2:11) and applied to his body after his death (Jn 19:39–40). (CSB)

37:26 *Judah*. Cf 49:10. This brother appears several times in the following chapters of Gn, both as a bad example (ch 38) and a noble one (44:18–34). (TLSB)

conceal his blood? Cover up his death. Cf 4:10. (TLSB)

37:28 *Midianite traders ... sold him to the Ishmaelites*. Midianites were desert-dwelling descendants of Abraham through his wife (or concubine) Keturah. The relation here with the Ishmaelites is unclear. Perhaps the Midianites and Ishmaelites intermingled, or there were both Midianite and Ishmaelite traders in the group to which Joseph was sold. At times, the two terms seem to be used interchangeably, as in Jgs 8:22–28. (TLSB)

twenty shekels of silver. In later times, this amount was the value of a male of Joseph’s age who had been dedicated to the Lord (see Lev 27:5). (CSB)

Typical price for a male slave during this era, attesting to the early second millennium context of the story. The price for slaves went up over time, as demonstrated in Scripture (cf Ex 21:32; 2Ki 15:20) and ancient literature. Coined money was not yet used, so this passage refers to the weight of silver paid. (TLSB)

37:30 *where shall I go?* As in, “How can I escape my grief?” Reuben wondered how he would explain Joseph’s disappearance to Jacob. His brothers had put him into a difficult situation. He felt he had to join in their deception. (TLSB)

37:31–33 Again a slaughtered goat figures prominently in an act of deception (see 27:5–13). (CSB)

37:34 *tore his clothes.* In this case, the tearing parallels what Jacob assumed happened to Joseph. Jacob’s lament goes far beyond that of Reuben. (TLSB)

put sackcloth on his loins. Wearing coarse and uncomfortable sackcloth instead of ordinary clothes was a sign of mourning. (CSB)

mourned ... many days. Usually public displays of grief lasted a week, or on occasion a month, as for Moses (Dt 34:8). Jacob declared that his grief for his son would last until he died (v 35). (TLSB)

37:35 Since they knew Joseph was alive, the brothers’ comfort was hypocritical. (TLSB)

daughters. The term can include daughters-in-law (e.g., a daughter-in-law of Jacob is mentioned in 38:2). (CSB)

Sheol. The Hebrew word *Sheol* (see NIV text note) can also refer in a more general way to the realm of the dead, the netherworld; see Job 3:13–19; Isa 38:18. (CSB)

37:36 *sold.* “As a slave” (Ps 105:17). The peoples of the Arabian Desert were long involved in international slave trade (cf. Am 1:6, 9). (CSB)

guard. The Hebrew for this word can mean “executioners” (the captain of whom was in charge of the royal prisoners; see 40:4), or it can mean “butchers” (the captain of whom was the chief cook in the royal court; cf. 1Sa 9:23–24). (CSB)

Office of high rank. (TLSB)

37:12–36 Joseph is betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery. Yet God spares Joseph’s life in order to fulfill His plan and the dreams He had revealed. When sin is not dealt with, it breeds even more wickedness. Joseph’s brothers let their hatred lead to betrayal and lies. Many years later, God’s Son was betrayed by His friend, not for 20 shekels but for 30 pieces of silver. Yet this also took place so that God could fulfill His plan for our salvation. • Heavenly Father, enable us to help those in need. Turn us away from self-pity and worry to compassion and sympathy. Send Your Holy Spirit to strengthen our faith in times of trial. In the Savior’s name we pray. Amen. (TLSB)