

6 – JOSEPH. GOD THE GATHERER

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Genesis 37: Joseph and his brothers

Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them.

37.3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made an ornate robe for him.

4 When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.

Cf. Gen 4 Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. 3 In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. 4 And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, 5 but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

5 Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. [...] He told it to his brothers. "Listen," he said, "[...] the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me."

10 When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, "What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?"

11 His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

12 Now his brothers had gone to graze their father's flocks near Shechem, 13 and Israel said to Joseph, "[...] I am going to send you to them." [...] So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. 18 But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him.

19 "Here comes that dreamer!" they said to each other. 20 "Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams."

21 When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. "Let's not take his life," he said. 22 "Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the wilderness, but don't lay a hand on him." Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father.

23 So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe—the ornate robe he was wearing— 24 and they took him and threw him into the cistern. The cistern was empty; there was no water in it.

25 As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt.

26 Judah said to his brothers, "What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? 27 Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood." His brothers agreed.

28 So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.

29 When Reuben returned to the cistern and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes. 30 He went back to his brothers and said, "The boy isn't there! Where can I turn now?"

31 Then they got Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. 32 They took the ornate robe back to their father and said, "We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe."

[33](#)He recognized it and said, "It is my son's robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces."

[34](#)Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. [35](#)All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "No," he said, "I will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave." So his father wept for him.

[36](#)Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard.

Genesis 45: Joseph Makes Himself Known

[1](#)Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. [2](#)And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it.

[3](#)Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence.

[4](#)Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said,

"I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! [5](#)And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. [6](#)For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. [7](#)But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. [8](#)"So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt. [9](#)Now hurry back to my father and say to him, 'This is what your son Joseph says: God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; don't delay. [10](#)You shall live in the region of Goshen and be near me—you, your children and grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and all you have. [11](#)I will provide for you there, because five years of famine are still to come. Otherwise you and your household and all who belong to you will become destitute.' [12](#)"You can see for yourselves, and so can my brother Benjamin, that it is really I who am speaking to you. [13](#)Tell my father about all the honor accorded me in Egypt and about everything you have seen. And bring my father down here quickly."

[14](#)Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. [15](#)And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him.

[...] [22](#)To each of them he gave new clothing, but to Benjamin he gave three hundred shekels of silver and five sets of clothes. [23](#)And this is what he sent to his father: ten donkeys loaded with the best things of Egypt, and ten female donkeys loaded with grain and bread and other provisions for his journey.

[24](#)Then he sent his brothers away, and as they were leaving he said to them, "Don't quarrel on the way!"

[25](#)So they went up out of Egypt and came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan. [26](#)They told him, "Joseph is still alive! In fact, he is ruler of all Egypt." Jacob was stunned; he did not believe them. [27](#)But when they told him everything Joseph had said to them, and when he saw the carts Joseph had sent to carry him back, the spirit of their father Jacob revived. [28](#)And Israel said, "I'm convinced! My son Joseph is still alive. I will go and see him before I die."

1. Joseph's name (yosef) is based on a Hebrew verb (yosef) that means "YHWH takes away."
 - 1.1. the root of his name is asaf which means "to gather, collect, bring in, or assemble."
 - 1.2. A keyword with this same root is asif meaning "harvest" — that which is collected.
 - 1.3. Joseph's name is related to the idea of "taking away" in a sense of "gathering" (taking the crops away from the field) as occurs in collecting a harvest.
 - 1.4. He is the "YHWH gathers"
 - 1.5. Another 'theophoric' name (from Greek: θεόφορος, theophoros, literally "bearing or carrying a god") embeds God's name in a person's name, reflecting something about the character of God (Like 'IsraEL', "he/she who wrestles with God").
 - 1.6. Another character whose life, behavior manifests something of who God is.

2. Joseph appears for the first time in Gen 30

²²Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and enabled her to conceive. ²³She became pregnant and gave birth to a son and said, "God has taken away my disgrace." ²⁴She named him Joseph, and said, "May the LORD add to me another son."

 - 2.1. Rachel was the wife Jacob had loved from the beginning – this is why he loved their two sons (Joseph and Benjamin) more than the others.

3. Joseph is the protagonist of the last 14 chapters of the book of Genesis (37-50) in what is more a novel than a collection of stories: many interpreters have emphasized the literary unity and sophistication of this section.¹

4. Plot
 - 4.1. The entire narrative is told through the perspective of Joseph.
 - 4.2. Clear structure: three pairs of dreams in chapters 37; 40; and 41.
 - 4.3. A series of crises that develop Joseph's character towards a final goal.
 - 4.4. Evolution from stranger to master.
 - 4.5. Initially few direct insights into Joseph's emotions – narrative build-up until their outpour in a dramatic finale where tears and joy cannot be contained no longer (Gen 45:1).

5. We have all the elements of a typically well structured plot²:
 - 5.1. Initial situation (Exposition) – Circumstances, difficulties, needs, characters.
 - 5.2. Complication - An element that sets the narrative in motion, including tension.
 - 5.3. Transforming action - Outcome of the quest that reverses initial situation.
 - 5.4. Denouement - Removal of tension by applying a transformative action to subject.
 - 5.5. Final Situation – Statement of new status, eliminating needs of initial situation.

6. There are well defined spatial settings:
 - 6.1. Canaan (Gen 37:1),
 - 6.2. Potiphar's Residence (Gen 37:36),
 - 6.3. Prison (Gen 39:20),
 - 6.4. Pharaoh's Court (Gen 41:14).

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¹ Cf. Arnold Hensman, *A Narrative Analysis of Genesis Chapter 37 as Introduction to The Joseph Novella*

² Marguerat and Bourquin, *How to Read Bible Stories*.

7. Themes: dreams, clothing, displaced stranger, transformation through suffering, healing.
8. Clothing: it represents transformation
 - 8.1. Jacobs's gift of the coat of long sleeves is pivotal in singling out Joseph as other (Gen 37:3). As 'other' he becomes the "scapegoat", that is a victim designated on the basis of his/her otherness on whom the violence of a group is periodically transferred.³
 - 8.2. Pharaoh's summoning, the gift of his ring, and the order that Joseph should be dressed in fine linen is in direct contrast to the loss of his coat of long sleeves at the pit (Gen 41:42).
 - 8.3. When the fully transformed Joseph confronts his brothers in Egypt, he does not strip them of their clothing as they once did to him. His contrasting character is demonstrated when he gives each the gift of fine garments (Gen 45:22).
 - 8.4. This gift of clothing to his brothers symbolises Joseph's forgiveness and love for them. It represents reconciliation.
9. Displaced stranger
 - 9.1. Joseph remains a stranger even though he occupies such an elevated social position. Cf. his later desire to have his earthly remains returned to Israel (Gen 50:25).
10. Transformation through suffering
 - 10.1. Joseph is transformed spiritually, emotionally, and physically. His original faith is encouraged rather than suppressed by his Egyptian hosts (Gen 41:12, 41:39).
11. Healing of the family
 - 11.1. The brothers ensure that peace and reconciliation will be impossible with Joseph present, "They hated him and could not speak peaceably to him" (Gen 37:4b).
 - 11.2. There is a need for healing in the family.

What does Joseph's story tell us about God

12. Why is Joseph not a patriarch? Despite being the protagonist of the longest sub-plot of the book of Genesis, he is never included in the list of those of whom God says: I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.
13. One significant difference is in the way in which God interacts with the patriarchs and with Joseph.
14. In Joseph's story, God never appears directly, nor engages in a dialogue with anyone. God intervenes through dreams and his action is detected retrospectively:
 - 14.1. the narrator knows this – and indeed we are told from the beginning that the Lord was at once with Joseph down in Egypt. (Gen 39:1-2).
 - 14.2. Potiphar could clearly see the Lord was with Joseph (Gen 39:3).

⁴Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned. ⁵From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the Lord blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the Lord was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field. ⁶ So Potiphar left everything he had in Joseph's care; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate.
 - 14.3. Indeed Joseph becomes a successful man (Gen 39:2).

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³ Cf. René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, tr. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1989).

- 14.4. On hearing of Joseph's reputation, Pharaoh realises that it is God who has given him such wisdom and discernment (Gen 41:38).
- 38 So Pharaoh asked them, "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?" 39 Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. 40 You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you."
- 14.5. Joseph acknowledges to Pharaoh that his good fortune is entirely due to God's providence (Gen 41:25).
- 25 Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, "The dreams of Pharaoh are one and the same. God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. [...] 32 The reason the dream was given to Pharaoh in two forms is that the matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon.
- 14.6. Joseph is following God in discerning which actions to take regarding the seven years of plenty and famine.
- 14.7. Later, while speaking in gratitude about his own sons born in Egypt, Manasseh and Ephraim, Joseph declares that he knew that God guided and protected him from the beginning (Gen 41):
- 50 Before the years of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph by Asenath daughter of Potiphra, priest of On. 51 Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh and said, "It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household." 52 The second son he named Ephraim and said, "It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering."
- 14.8. At the end Joseph tells his repentant brothers, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good" (Gen 50:20).
- 19 But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? 20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. 21 So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.
15. The form in which God acts and is present in Joseph's life is all the more striking because in the midst of the Joseph section we are told that God appears to Jacob and talks to him exactly in the way he did with the other patriarchs
- 1 So Israel set out with all that was his, and when he reached Beersheba, he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. 2 And God spoke to Israel in a vision at night and said, "Jacob! Jacob!" "Here I am," he replied. 3 "I am God, the God of your father," he said. "Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. 4 I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again. And Joseph's own hand will close your eyes."
16. Thus the way in which God reveals himself in Joseph's life is different
- 16.1. God is he who wants the life and rescue of every human being, not only of those he has chosen: through Joseph, God saves Egypt and all the nations who come to get wheat from them in the time of famine.
- 16.2. God is he who gathers us by healing us, reconciling us to ourselves and to one another.
- 16.3. God leads history and acts in our lives invisibly – through our faith in him.