



Jacob's Sons Attempt to Rid themselves of Joseph

Read Genesis 37:12-36

Introduction

In the opening verses of Genesis 37 we are given a glimpse into the attitudes that lived in the household of aging Jacob. He has children from four different women, two wives and two maidservants. But Jacob loves the firstborn of his beloved wife Rachel, and he does not hide that fact in any way. The text makes clear that a series of events (e.g., a special coat, two dreams, etc.) cause brother hatred to escalate against Joseph. Yet the clear message that comes through is that some royal role belongs to young Joseph. Father Jacob seems to want it, and, if dreams come from God, then this royalty appears to have divine approval as well.

Jacob sends Joseph on a mission (37:12-14)

Joseph's brothers take their father's flocks to graze near Shechem (the city where the massacre had occurred in Genesis 34). The household of Jacob is semi-nomadic; that is, they lived in tents in a particular area as long as enough water and grazing area exist for the flocks and herds. If necessary, a nomad like Jacob would move around, or move his flocks, to any place where supplies of water and grazing fields were available. Jacob has been living near Hebron; his sons must take the herds to an area in central Canaan, just over 50 miles (over 80 kilometers) to the north.

Jacob sends Joseph to check on the wellbeing (*shalom*) of his brothers and the flocks. Interesting irony: earlier in verse 4 the text notes that Joseph's brothers could not speak a "kind word" (literally, *shalom*) to him. We wonder whether it is possible that Jacob does not know how intense the hatred is by his sons against Joseph. Could that fact have simply gone over his head? It is hard to believe that Jacob is completely unaware of the brothers' intense dislike of Joseph. If he is aware of it, why does he send young Joseph to the brothers? Or is it the case that Jacob is, in fact, aware of family friction (normal, isn't it?), but that he believes his sons would never do anything harmful or malicious to Joseph? In any case, he sends young Joseph to find them.

He came to his own, but... (37:14-20)

The brothers have in fact moved on from Shechem to Dothan, almost 15 miles (about 24 kilometers) north of Shechem. An unnamed man helps Joseph find the brothers, and they in turn see him coming from a distance. Although they do not have binoculars, apparently Joseph comes to them wearing the special coat that his father had made for him. This coat was only one of the reasons that the sons of Jacob hate Joseph. What should catch our attention is the fact that his mere appearance causes their hatred to flare up. Verse 18: *"But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him."* Joseph does not have to say a word to his brothers before they have murderous thoughts come out. One does not have to pinch or probe deeply at all in the souls of these brothers for there to be an eruption of murderous scheming. With sneering sarcasm, they call him a *"master of dreams, the dreamer,"* thinking that by killing him they could snuff out any prospect of his dreams coming to fulfillment. Clearly they do not believe that the dreams are from God.

Reuben plans to rescue Joseph (37:21-24)

Reuben, the eldest brother and thus the "one in charge," persuades them not to kill Joseph for the moment, but only throw him into an empty cistern (his first "prison"). Reuben wants to pull them back from personal bloodguilt and rescue Joseph later. But Reuben leaves the area for a while. Joseph is stripped of his special coat, that hated symbol of the father's special love. If it is possible that Joseph was not sure of what his brothers thought of him before, there cannot be any doubt now. At this point Joseph could only wonder if they were leaving him to die of hunger and thirst, or if they would actively take his life. He would cry out from that cistern for mercy, but his brothers would turn a deaf ear to his cries.

"Let's make deal" (37:25-28)

It's time for lunch, and the brothers eat together. Joseph gets nothing. This sets us up for a great irony later on when the brothers would stand in Egypt, "hat in hand" so to speak, asking Joseph for food because of the great famine that would strike the land. But that is later. There are more ironies to come.

Canaan is strategically located as a place where several trade routes exist between Egypt and Mesopotamia. We are not surprised to read that a trading caravan is spotted on its way to Egypt. The identity of these traders may be confusing to some readers, as well as who sold whom. The explanation offered here is that "Ishmaelite" and "Midianite" are basically interchangeable terms. Both Ishmael and Midian are children of Abraham (see Genesis 25:1ff.). It may be that Ishmaelite came to be the more general term, while Midianite was a more specific term (cf. the use of terms "Arab" and "Iraqi," or "German" and "Bavarian" to illustrate the general and the specific identifications).

When these traveling merchants are spotted, it is Judah who comes up with the idea to sell Joseph. To him and his brothers, this seems to be a "win-win" solution: we don't actually kill Joseph, but instead we get some cash out of selling him. In other words, he is out of our life forever, plus we get some pocket change!

Joseph is sold for 20 pieces of silver. Later in the law of Moses, a male slave (between 5 and 20 years of age), specially dedicated to the LORD, was valued at 20 shekels (ages 5-20). According to the Hammurabi law code, this was the price of male slaves in the ancient Near East at that time (prices for slaves would rise over the centuries, of course). Joseph would later describe this event as being sold into Egypt, clearly against his will (see Genesis 40:15 and 45:4, 5).

Torn and blood-stained clothing (37:29-34)

Reuben returns to his brothers, only to find young Joseph gone, now in chains and on his way to Egypt. Reuben tears his clothes as a sign of his grief. His plan to spare Joseph's life has now come to nothing. Reuben did not have the courage to stand up to his murder-plotting brothers. He did not rebuke them firmly for their plans, and now the result is the loss of Joseph. Reuben must now, probably with great reluctance, go along with the clever strategy of his brothers to deceive his own father.

But there is more. The brothers take Joseph's special coat, kill a goat and use its blood to stain the coat. When they confront their father with this coat, their words are clever in the sense that they say nothing that is contrary to fact.

"Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe."

They do not even use his name "Joseph." He is "your son," not, "our brother." Jacob recognizes it and then makes the conclusion that the brothers had hoped he would make. *"It's Joseph's coat; a wild (literally, 'evil') animal has eaten him."*

There is an irony here: Jacob had used goat meat and goat's skins (clothes) earlier to deceive his father Isaac (Genesis 27:16) to obtain the blessing. Now another goat dies to provide the blood to

deceive another father, but this time the father is Jacob! Jacob now tears his own clothes as a sign of grief.

Grief carried to the grave (37:34-35)

Those who grieve go through various stages of mood. When one loses a precious family member or beloved friend, you know these moods of grief. There is perhaps denial, anger, depression, a general melancholy. The passage of time may help, but usually some kind of emotional scar remains. We need to work through this grief, and the presence of family and friends can help. Jacob's children surround him to support him, comfort him, and help him through his understandable grief. This old man Jacob has lost the beloved son of his favorite wife. He has seen many blessings from God over the years, but now he refuses to accept anyone's comforting words or gestures. Jacob is prepared to carry this grief into his grave, the realm of the dead.

Sold as a slave (37:36)

Genesis 37 ends on a sad, ominous note: Joseph is sold in Egypt to a very high ranking official of the court of Pharaoh. We will say more about this man Potiphar in a later lesson. Psalm 105:17 notes that Joseph has been reduced to slavery. He has moved at the beginning of this chapter from being the beloved and favored son of his father to utter humiliation. Such a descent into slavery was at the hands of his blood brothers! And yet, the fact that the man who purchased him was an official of Pharaoh carries rich possibilities. At least Joseph is not sold into obscurity, to slave away his young life for a few years and then die unknown in some remote village of Egypt. The last verse of Genesis 37 tantalizes the reader and sets us up for the further developments of Genesis 39.

Since nothing comes to us by chance, but everything by God's fatherly hand, we know that some divine plan is being worked out. But God does not appear to any of the characters, neither to Joseph nor to Jacob, to inform them of what is happening. Other Biblical characters may have reassuring visits from God's angels or even a divine voice ("Don't be afraid!"), but such a visit or such a voice does not come forward here. We can only wonder what may have passed through Joseph's mind in these days, weeks, and months. His situation plummets from royal riches, so to speak, to wretched rags in this chapter. Did these kinds of questions nag at his soul: "Why did my own brothers do this to me?" "What kind of God do I serve?" "Is there no justice in this world?"

It is one thing to fall under difficult circumstances in life and see God's disciplinary hand as rightly there. But it is quite another thing to suffer for no apparent reason. And God remains silent. Can any human faith suffice then to hold onto God? If Joseph is to survive both spiritually and physically, then a power and strength greater than anything Joseph has must be with him. But such is God's grace.

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Points to ponder and discuss

1. How can we explain Jacob's decision to send Joseph off to visit his brothers? Is Jacob completely unaware that his sons loathe Joseph? Do parents sometimes act "in denial" about realities that anyone else can see? Or, can parents simply fail to pick up on the important personal life clues that close family members can give?

2. This family of Jacob is the church! Or is it? What explanation can we give to the fact that the desire to kill Joseph — or at least be rid of him — has the overwhelming support of most of Jacob's sons? We will see something very similar when Pharisees, people who said that all Israelites must live pure and holy lives, will actively plot to kill the Lord Jesus Christ. How can such murderous hatred exist among people who profess something else?
3. Read Exodus 21:16 and Deuteronomy 24:7 (cf. Deuteronomy 23:15). Stealing property is an economic crime, but kidnapping and selling human beings was a capital crime. What is the difference between being a "servant" who works off a debt, on the one hand, and the kind of selling of people condemned in the law of God, on the other hand? Can human beings ever be viewed as property?
4. The movie "Amazing Grace" tells the story of the British Christian leader, William Wilberforce, who labored to rid the British Empire of slavery in the 19th century. What kind of slavery existed historically in the United States? What evils were let loose by such slavery? Why was it defended even by some Christians? Does such trafficking in human beings continue to this day?
5. The blood-stained coat convinces Jacob that Joseph is dead. His grief is quite understandable, is it not? Yet he refuses to be comforted. Could he wonder how his sons could have ever found this coat in all the countryside of Canaan? By refusing the comfort of his children, is it possible that Jacob may harbor a sneaking suspicion that somehow, somewhere, his own children were involved in the death of Joseph? Could the sons of Jacob pretend also to mourn? Many issues remain unresolved...
6. Look over Genesis 37 again. Is God ever mentioned in this chapter? How is God working in these sad events? What providences happen in this story that will work out a good result, even if it is very hard to see it at this point in the story?