

Genesis Chapter 37

Genesis 37:1 "And Jacob dwelt in the land wherein his father was a stranger, in the land of Canaan."

“And Jacob dwelt in the land wherein his father was a stranger “: And this stands opposed unto, and is distinguished from the case and circumstances of Esau and his posterity, expressed in the preceding chapter, who dwelt in the land of their possession, not as strangers and sojourners, as Jacob and his seed, but as lords and proprietors.

And so these words may be introduced and read in connection with the former history; "but Jacob dwelt", etc. And this verse would better conclude the preceding chapter than begin a new one.

This by-line into the story of Jacob’s son, Joseph, informs the reader that Jacob’s father, Isaac, hence his sons as well, though in the land, had not yet entered into possession of their inheritance. They were still alien residents.

“Land of Canaan”: Actually, Jacob and his family were in Hebron (verse 14; see note on 13:18).

Verses 37:2 – 50:26 contains the genealogy of Jacob.

Genesis 37:2 "These [are] the generations of Jacob. Joseph, [being] seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brethren; and the lad [was] with the sons of Bilhah, and with the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives: and Joseph brought unto his father their evil report."

“Joseph, being seventeen years old”: Eleven years had passed since he had entered the land of Canaan with his family (30:22-24), since Joseph was born 6 years before departing from Haran.

Joseph was the eleventh son of Jacob, the first son of Rachel (30:24), and was his father’s favorite. However, he was resented by his jealous brothers, who sold him into slavery to a passing caravan of Ishmaelites.

Joseph arrived in Egypt during the Second Intermediate period of ancient Egypt’s history, and rose to the position of grand vizier or prime minister to the Pharaohs (probably Sesostri II and Sesostri III).

Joseph eventually reconciled to his brothers. He then invited his father and entire family to move to Egypt to escape a great famine and thus preserve the line of the Messiah. Joseph received the blessing (double portion), from his father (48:8-22; see Genesis 30:22-24; 41:37-53).

The reference to being a “lad” suggests he may have been a servant or helper (22:3; Exodus 33:11), as his age has already been cited.

“Evil report”: Whether Joseph brought his at his own initiative or reported back at the father’s demand on 4 of his brothers (e.g. verse 14), is not elaborated upon, nor specifically cited as the cause of the brothers’ intense dislike of Joseph (verses 4-5, 8, 11, 18-19).

“Their report” was “evil” in the sense that their actions were evil and he reported this to his father.

Jacob was living in Canaan. Joseph, Rachel's son, was beloved of his father. He was working with the handmaid's sons. Joseph came back to Israel telling of these half-brothers' evil deeds.

Verses 3-4: Overt favoritism of Joseph and tacit appointment of him as the primary son by the father (see note on 37:3), conspired to estrange him from his brothers. They hated and envied him (verses 4-5, 11), and could not interact with him without conflict and hostility. Joseph must have noticed the situation.

Genesis 37:3 "Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he [was] the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of [many] colors."

The fact that Jacob “loved Joseph more than all his children” indicates he had learned nothing from his previous experiences with favoritism (25:28).

“Coat of many colors”: The Septuagint (LXX), favored this translation of the Hebrew phrase used by Moses, although some prefer “a long-sleeved robe” or “an ornamented tunic.” It marked the owner as the one whom the father intended to be the future leader of the household, and honor normally given to the firstborn son.

“He made him a coat of many colors: This traditional understanding, and the alternate “coat with sleeves,” are sheer guesses from the context. The phrase *ketonet passim*, “a coat of many colors,” occurs aside from this section only (in 2 Samuel 13:18-19), where it describes a garment worn by the daughters of kings.

Joseph was Israel's favorite, because he loved Rachel very much, and they waited so long for him to be born. The coat of many colors was a coat that set Joseph apart from his brothers. This was visible evidence that Joseph was Israel's favorite. Israel was wealthy, and this coat was very beautiful.

Genesis 37:4 "And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him."

"And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren": Which they perceived by various things in his behavior to him, by his words, his looks, his gestures, and particularly by the coat he had made him, which distinguished him from the rest.

"They hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him": They not only inwardly hated him, but they could not conceal their hatred, but betrayed it by their speech unto him.

Jealousy is not of God. Jealousy and hate are not to be known among the believers. These brothers hated Joseph, because Israel loved him. Their hateful attitude could do nothing, but create a problem.

Verses 5-10: The content of the dreams which Joseph recounted worsened brotherly hostility, with the second one also incurring fatherly rebuke. The dream symbolism needed no special interpretation to catch its significant elevation of the favored son to ruling status over his brothers (verses 8-10).

Genesis 37:5 "And Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told [it] his brethren: and they hated him yet the more."

"And Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told it his brethren": As a dream, in the simplicity of his heart; not understanding it, or imagining there was any meaning in it. He told it not with any design to affront them, but as an amusement, and for their diversion, there being something in it odd and ridiculous, as he himself might think.

"And they hated him yet the more": Not only because he had carried an ill report of them to his father, and because he loved him more than they, but still more because of this dream. The meaning of which they at once understood, though he did not, which yet they supposed he did, and that he told them it in a boasting manner, just to irritate them.

Genesis 37:6 "And he said unto them, Hear, I pray you, this dream which I have dreamed:"

"And he said unto them, hear, I pray you, this dream which I have dreamed": Hear now, so the Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan, immediately, directly, lest he should forget it, having perhaps dreamt it the night before.

Genesis 37:7 "For, behold, we [were] binding sheaves in the field, and, lo, my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves stood round about, and made obeisance to my sheaf."

"For, behold, we were binding sheaves in the field": So, it was represented in his mind in a dream, as if it was harvest time, and he and his brethren were at work together in the field binding up sheaves of corn that were reaped, in order to be carried home.

"And, lo, my sheaf arose, and stood upright": It seemed to him, that after he had bound and laid it on the ground, that it rose up of itself, and stood erect.

"And, behold, your sheaves stood round about, and made obeisance to my sheaf": The sheaves which his brethren bound up, they also stood upright, and all around his sheaf, and bowed unto it; so it appeared to him in his dream. This was a fit emblem of their coming to him into Egypt for corn, and bowing to him, when their sheaves were empty, and his was full.

God speaks to some people in dreams. This was obviously what had happened here. Joseph was chosen of God, and God was speaking to him in this dream. They hated him even more now, because even God was showing preference to him.

He rubbed the insult in by asking them to hear the dream, which built him up and shows them as bowing to him. This would really cause their anger and hate for him to be worse.

Genesis 37:8 "And his brethren said to him, Shalt thou indeed reign over us? or shalt thou indeed have dominion over us? And they hated him yet the more for his dreams, and for his words."

"And his brethren said unto him": After he had told his dream, being highly offended with him, understanding the dream, and the meaning of it, better than he did.

"Shalt thou indeed reign over us? or shall thou indeed have dominion over us?" denying that he ever should, and reproving him for his vanity, in concluding from hence that he would have the dominion over them. So the Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan, dost thou think, suppose, or imagine that thou shall rule over us?

It looks as if by telling us this dream that such a whim and fancy has got into thine head.

"And they hated him yet the more for his dreams and for his words": For it seems by this that he had dreamt, and told them more dreams besides this, and they hated him both for them, and for his telling them to them; though Jarchi thinks the phrase, "for his words", refers to the ill report he gave of them to his father (Gen. 37:2).

Of course, Joseph had no control over his dreams. The dreams were from God. Their hate grew more and more, because they were more and more jealous of him.

Genesis 37:9 "And he dreamed yet another dream, and told it his brethren, and said, Behold, I have dreamed a dream more; and, behold, the sun and the moon and the eleven stars made obeisance to me."

"And he dreamed yet another dream": Relating to the name subject as the former, and, for the confirmation of it, only the emblems are different, and more comprehensive.

"And told it his brethren, and said, behold, I have dreamed a dream more": Another dream, and which he told, either as not knowing fully the resentment of his brethren at his former dream, or in order to clear himself from any charge of feigning the dream, or having any ill intention in telling it.

Seeing he had another to the same purpose, and therefore thought fit to acquaint them with it, that they might more seriously consider of it, whether there was not something divine in it, which he himself began to think there was.

"And, behold, the sun, and the moon, and the eleven stars, made their obeisance to me": In his dream, it seemed to him either that he was taken up into the starry heaven, and these luminaries bowed unto him, or else that they descended to him on earth, and paid their respects unto him.

Genesis 37:10 "And he told [it] to his father, and to his brethren: and his father rebuked him, and said unto him, What [is] this dream that thou hast dreamed? Shall I and thy mother and thy brethren indeed come to bow down ourselves to thee to the earth?"

"And he told it to his father, and to his brethren": After he had told it to his brethren, he told it to his father a second time in their hearing, that he might pass his judgment on it, and give his sense of it before them.

"And his father rebuked him": Not as being ignorant of the meaning of the dream, for by what follows he had a clear understanding of it, or as if he thought it was an idle dream, and would never have any accomplishment.

"And said unto him, what is this dream that thou hast dreamed?" what dost thou take to be the meaning of it? canst thou imagine that it is of God? Is it not a mere whim and imagination of thine own wandering brain in thy sleep? Why dost thou tell such an idle dream as this, as if there were something divine in it, when it appears the most absurd and irrational?

"Shall I, thy mother, and thy brethren, indeed come to bow down ourselves to thee to the earth?" Whereby it plainly shows he understood the meaning of the dream, though he would not seem to give his blessing to it. By the "sun" he understood himself, the principal and head of the family, the active instrument of the generation of it, the light, life, and support of it.

By the "moon" his wife, the passive instrument of generation, who had the lesser share of rule in the family, yet contributed much to its good and welfare; by whom is meant not Rachel, the real mother of Joseph, who was dead, unless this is observed to show the seeming absurdity of it, from whence the whole might appear ridiculous. Rather Leah, who was now Jacob's only true wife, and the stepmother of Joseph.

Or else Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid, who since her death was a mother to Joseph. And by the eleven "stars" he understood the eleven brethren of Joseph, who were as stars that receive their light from the sun; and in allusion to the twelve constellations in the Zodiac, to which Joseph and his eleven brethren answered.

The sun and moon clearly point out the father and mother. The mother is to be taken, we conceive, in the abstract, without nicely inquiring whether it means the departed Rachel, or the probably still living Leah.

Here again, Joseph's dream came from God. The sun was symbolic of his father, the moon was symbolic of his mother, and the eleven stars were symbolic of his brothers. Even his father scolded him, not believing that he would be elevated above his family by God. God chooses whoever He will to elevate.

When you have a special experience with God, the hardest ones to convince are the members of your family. It is difficult for them to believe that God is doing something special in your life, because they know you too well. The Bible even says when you are making a decision like Joseph's, that those who will be against it will be your closest friends and your family.

Genesis 37:11 "And his brethren envied him; but his father observed the saying."

“Observed the saying”: Unlike the brothers, who immediately rejected any meaning to Joseph’s words yet still allowed the dream to sorely irritate them into greater resentment of their brother (verse 19), the father, notwithstanding his public admonishment of Joseph, continued to ponder the meaning of the dreams.

This just made the brothers more jealous. Joseph's father listened and remembered the saying.

Verses 12-17: The assignment to Shechem brought Joseph providentially to Dothan, a site more convenient for contact with merchants using the main trade route on their way to Egypt.

“Shechem ... Hebron”: Shechem (see note on 12:6), was located 50 miles north of Hebron (see note on 13:18).

Genesis 37:12 "And his brethren went to feed their father's flock in Shechem."

"And his brethren went to feed their father's flock in Shechem": Very probably some considerable time after the telling of the above dreams. It was usual to remove flocks from place to place for the sake of pasturage; and sometimes at a great distance, as Shechem was from Hebron, where Jacob now dwelt, said to be about sixty miles.

But this is not so much to be marveled at as the place itself; whither they went. For though Jacob had bought a parcel of a field in this place (Gen. 33:19), which might be a reason for their going there to feed their father's flocks in his own field.

Yet it was the place where they had committed a most outrageous action in destroying all the males there, and therefore might fear the inhabitants of the neighboring cities would rise upon them and cut them off.

Genesis 37:13 "And Israel said unto Joseph, Do not thy brethren feed [the flock] in Shechem? come, and I will send thee unto them. And he said to him, Here [am I]."

"And Israel said unto Joseph": After his brethren had been gone some time to Shechem.

"Do not thy brethren feed the flock in Shechem?" This question is put, not as ignorant of it, or doubting about it, but to put Joseph in mind of it, and in order to what follows.

"Come, and I will send thee unto them": Which is pretty much he should, considering the length of the way, sixty miles. The dangerous place in which they were feeding their flocks, and especially seeing his brethren envied and hated him.

But Jacob might think that by this time things had worn off of their minds; and it is certain he had no suspicion of their hatred rising so high as to attempt to take his life. It is plain he had none concerning them, when his coat was brought to him, but believed it was wild beasts that had devoured him.

"And he said unto him, here am I": Showing his readiness to obey his father, and go on this errand, though it was a long journey, and he to go it alone, and his brethren also bore no good will to him.

Joseph was obedient to his father. When his father asked him to go, he said, "here am I."

Genesis 37:14 "And he said to him, Go, I pray thee, see whether it be well with thy brethren, and well with the flocks; and bring me word again. So he sent him out of the vale of Hebron, and he came to Shechem."

"And he said to him, go, I pray thee": Or "now", directly, immediately, which is more agreeable to the authority of a father.

"See whether it be well with thy brethren, and well with the flocks": It having been many days, and perhaps months, since he had heard anything of them; and the rather Jacob might be under a concern for them, because of the danger they were exposed to from the neighboring tribes and nations of the Canaanites, on account of their having some time ago destroyed the Shechemites.

"And bring me word again": Of their welfare, and of the state of their flocks.

"So he sent him out of the vale of Hebron": The same with the plains of Mamre near the city of Hebron, which was built on a hill.

"And he came to Shechem": After he had travelled sixty miles.

Israel was well over one hundred years old, and he was, probably, not able to go for himself to check on the sons and the flock. We saw earlier where Joseph told of their indiscretion, so we know that Joseph would not cover for them.

Genesis 37:15 "And a certain man found him, and, behold, [he was] wandering in the field: and the man asked him, saying, What seekest thou?"

"And a certain man found him": Many of the Jewish writers say, this was an angel, the angel Gabriel, in the likeness of a man. But according to Aben Ezra, it was a traveler he met on the

road; but it is more probable, as Schimidt observes, that it was some man at work in the field that came upon him and took notice of him.

"And, behold, he was wandering in the field": In some field near Shechem, perhaps the same his father Jacob had purchased, and where he expected to have found his brethren, and was looking out for them. Going to and fro in search of them; which the laboring man in the field observed.

"And the man asked him, saying, what seekest thou?" Seeing him walking about, and first looking one way, and then another, concluded he was in search of something, either of some man or of some creature, a sheep or an ox that was lost; and therefore, put this question to him, with a view to give him what direction and assistance he could.

Genesis 37:16 "And he said, I seek my brethren: tell me, I pray thee, where they feed [their flocks]."

"And he said, I seek my brethren": Whom, no doubt, he described to the man, and told him who they were, and to whom they belonged. Or otherwise the man would have been at a loss to know who he meant, and what further to say to him, and without which Joseph would never have made the following request to him.

"Tell me, I pray thee, where they feed their flocks": In what part of the country they are, what field they are in, how far to it, and which the way.

Genesis 37:17 "And the man said, They are departed hence; for I heard them say, Let us go to Dothan. And Joseph went after his brethren, and found them in Dothan."

"And the man said, they are departed hence": They had been there, in the field where he and Joseph were, and which was probably the field before mentioned. But for good reasons, perhaps for want of pasture. Or in order to find better feeding for their cattle, they were gone from the fields about Shechem.

"For I heard them say, let us go to Dothan": It was a plain country between fruitful hills, next to fountains, and with pasture ground, very fit for feeding cattle; and its name, as Hillerus notes, signifies grassy, or a place of tender grass.

Here, afterwards, was a city built, not far from Samaria (2 Kings 6:13); about twelve miles to the north of it, as says Jerom. It was in the tribe of Manasseh, about forty four miles from Jerusalem to the north, and six miles from Tiberias to the west.

"And Joseph went after his brethren, and found them in Dothan": Which shows that he had a real desire to see them, and know their state and condition, that he might report it to his father. Since he might have returned on not finding them at Shechem, that being the place he was sent to, and would have been sufficient to have shown obedience to his father's commands, though perhaps it might not have come up to his full sense and meaning.

It seems, their flock was so big that they had to move around to find grass for them. Joseph had to search them out. Dothan was the place of the two wells. There was water to water the flock. Here at Dothan was where he could find them.

Verses 18-27: The brothers' plans from murder and cover-up, the fruit of hate and envy, were forestalled by two brothers. First by Reuben, who intended to effect a complete rescue (verses 21-22), and then by Judah who, prompted by a passing merchant's caravan, proposed a profitable alternative to the killing of one's brother (verses 25-27).

Genesis 37:18 "And when they saw him afar off, even before he came near unto them, they conspired against him to slay him."

"And when they saw him afar off": They knew him as soon as they saw him, by his stature, his gesture or manner of walking, and especially by his coat of various colors he now had on (Genesis 37:23).

"Even before he came near unto them": The distance he was from them when they first spied him is particularly remarked and repeated. Not to show the quickness of their sight but for the sake of what happens next. To observe how soon their passions were raised, how intense and deliberate their malice, and which put them upon devising ways and means to destroy him, for it follows.

"They conspired against him, to slay him": They entered a discussion, and devised the craftiest methods they could think of to take away his life, and yet conceal the murder.

Genesis 37:19 "And they said one to another, Behold, this dreamer cometh."

"And they said one to another": According to the Targum of Jonathan, Simeon and Levi said what follows. Nor is it unlikely, since they were hot, passionate, cruel, and bloody minded men, as appears by the affair of Shechem. And perhaps this may be the reason why Joseph afterwards, when governor of Egypt, took Simeon and bound him (Genesis 42:24).

Which would be a just retaliation; for his advice to cast him into a pit when slain.

"Behold, this dreamer cometh": Or "master of dreams". Not of the interpretation of them, but of dreaming them. That had them at his command when he pleased, as they jeeringly flouted him. As if he was a framer and contriver of them and only pretended to them when he had none, or else that he was frequently dreaming and telling his dreams.

This they said in a sarcastic way, and perhaps as pleased and rejoicing, that such an opportunity offered to take their revenge on him. This shows that it was on the account of his dreams chiefly that they bore such a grudge against him, that this was uppermost on their minds. And was revived at first sight of him, and from whence their malice sprung.

You see Jealousy becomes hate which, if not controlled, can grow into murder. These brothers did not want to hear any more of his dreams. They also, did not want to be reminded of their father's love of Joseph over them by his coat of many colors.

Genesis 37:20 "Come now therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into some pit, and we will say, Some evil beast hath devoured him: and we shall see what will become of his dreams."

"Come now therefore, and let us slay him": Agree to do it, and actually do it.

"And cast him into some pit": or, "one of the pits" which was near, and was dug for the collection of rainwater, as was usual in those countries where water was scarce.

"And we will say, some evil beast hath devoured him": Which would seem plausible, since wild beasts were frequent in those parts, as lions and bears (see 1 Kings 13:24).

"And we shall see what will become of his dreams": Who will be the lord then, and reign, and have the dominion, he or we.

Joseph was away from the protection of his father, and these jealous brothers had a scheme to get rid of him. Of course, not only were they going to sin by killing him, but they would have to sin again, when they lied to their father about what happened to him. One sin usually leads to another.

Genesis 37:21 "And Reuben heard [it], and he delivered him out of their hands; and said, Let us not kill him."

"And Reuben heard it": Overheard what they said, not being in the consultation. Perhaps knowing his temper and disposition to be more mild and gentle, and being the elder brother, might fear he would overrule matters against them.

Therefore, Simeon and Levi did not choose to have him in the debate; or he might be at some distance and entirely absent when the consultation was held, and their intention was reported to him by some of them.

"And he delivered him out of their hands": From slaying him; that is, he endeavored to do it by proposing another scheme.

"And said, let us not kill him": or let us not smite the soul; the dear soul, or take away life.

Genesis 37:22 "And Reuben said unto them, Shed no blood, [but] cast him into this pit that [is] in the wilderness, and lay no hand upon him; that he might rid him out of their hands, to deliver him to his father again."

"And Reuben said unto them, shed no blood": Innocent blood, as the Targum of Jonathan. The blood of a man, a brother's blood, one that had not done anything wherefore it should be shed,

and which would involve in guilt, and bring vengeance on them. He seems to put them in mind of the original law (in Genesis 9:6).

"But cast him into this pit that is in the wilderness, and lay no hand upon him": Which might seem to answer the same purpose, namely, by depriving him of his life in another way, by starving him. But this was not Reuben's intention, as appears by the next verse and by his going to the pit afterwards, as it should seem, with a view to take him out of it privately.

"That he might rid him out of their hands, to deliver him to his father again": Safe and sound, in order, as it is thought by many interpreters, to reconcile his father to him, whose bed he had abused.

Reuben was older and, probably, a little more level-headed. He knew the consequences of shedding blood. He talked them into sparing Joseph's life.

Genesis 37:23 "And it came to pass, when Joseph was come unto his brethren, that they stripped Joseph out of his coat, [his] coat of [many] colors that [was] on him;"

"And it came to pass, when Joseph was come unto his brethren": To the very place where they were, and had, in a kind and obliging manner, asked of their welfare, and related their father's concern for them, who had sent him on this errand.

"That they stripped Joseph out of his coat; his coat of many colors, that was on him": According to Jarchi and Aben Ezra, this was not one and the same coat, but different. And that the sense is, that with his coat of many colors. And besides that, they stripped him of his lower garment, which was next to his skin, his shirt.

So that he was quite naked when they cast him into the pit, and this they did as soon as he came up to them, so cruel and hardhearted were they.

Genesis 37:24 "And they took him, and cast him into a pit: and the pit [was] empty, [there was] no water in it."

"And they took him, and cast him into a pit": Into the same that Reuben pointed to them, whose counsel they gladly took and readily executed, supposing he meant the same thing they did, starving him to death.

"And the pit was empty, there was no water in it": Only serpents and scorpions. As the Targum of Jonathan; and Jarchi adds, this remark, that there was no water in it, seems to be made either to furnish out a reason why Reuben directed to it, that he might be the more easily got out of it, and not be in danger of losing his life at once, or of being drowned in it.

Or else to show the uncomfortable situation he was in, having not so much as a drop of water to refresh him (see Zechariah 9:11). Dothan is said to remain to this day, and the inhabitants of it show the ancient ditch into which Joseph was cast.

Reuben's advice had been taken. They had taken this coat from Joseph that has caused so much trouble. He had been totally degraded and thrown into a pit. Joseph was at their mercy now. But overall, he was really in God's mercy as God had other plans for him.

Genesis Chapter 37 Questions

1. Where did Israel dwell now?
2. How old was Joseph?
3. Who was he feeding with?
4. What did Joseph tell his father about them?
5. Who was Joseph's mother?
6. Who was Israel's favorite?
7. Why?
8. What special gift did he make for him?
9. How did this make Joseph's brothers feel about him?
10. What two things are not to be held among the believers?
11. How did Joseph's dream affect his brothers?
12. What did he dream the first time?
13. What question did the brothers ask in response to his dream?
14. Describe the second dream.
15. Who was the sun a symbol for?
16. Who was the moon a symbol for?
17. Who were the eleven stars' symbols of?
18. Who scolded Joseph about the second dream?
19. Where did the brothers go to feed their father's flock?
20. When Israel asked Joseph to go back and check on his brothers, what was his response?
21. Where did he leave from?

22. Who told him where to find his brothers?
23. Where did they go?
24. Dothan was the place of two what?
25. What did they conspire to do to him?
26. What did they call Joseph?
27. Who delivered Joseph out of their hands?
28. What did Reuben tell them to do?
29. What two things did his brothers do to him?
30. Whose mercy must he depend upon?