

# Genesis 37: Biblical Reading and Reflections

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 07 February 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Genesis chapter 37. Jacob lived in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan. These are the generations of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was pastoring 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. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colours. 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. Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more.

He said to them, Hear this dream that I have dreamed. Behold, we are 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. 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. 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. 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? And his brothers were jealous of him. But his father kept the saying in mind. Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. 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. 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. The man found him wandering in the fields. And the man asked him, What are you seeking? I am seeking my brothers, he said. Tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock. 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. They saw him from afar. And before he came near to them, they conspired against him to kill him. They said to one another, Here comes this dreamer. 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. But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands, saying, Let us not take his life. 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. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colours that he wore. And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty, there was no water in it. 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. Then Judah said to his brothers, What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? 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. 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. When Reuben returned to the pit, and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes and returned to his brothers and said, The boy is gone, and I, where shall I go?

And they took Joseph's robe and slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. And they sent the robe of many colours and brought it to their father and said, This we have found. Please identify whether it is your son's robe or not. 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. Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. 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.

[ 4 : 29 ] Thus his father wept for him. Meanwhile, the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard.

In Genesis chapter 37, Joseph is sold into slavery in Egypt. This story, perhaps more than any other in Genesis, is a story where we need to hear the stories behind the story. The phenomenon of stories behind stories is something we find in Genesis, and elsewhere in scripture. It is very important that we listen carefully to the words that are chosen, the details that are referenced, the patterns that are followed, because all of these things can highlight what is beneath the surface.

Before we consider the events of Genesis 37, we should get some of the background in mind again. Laban mixed up his two daughters and gave Jacob Leah instead of Rachel. Leah was not loved, Rachel was loved, and there was a rivalry between the two sisters. Now they resolved that rivalry, but the next generation, you can see that rivalry continue. Jacob seems to favour his children through Rachel over the children through Leah. When Dinah, his daughter through Leah, is raped, he does not take action. It has to be Simeon and Levi, her brothers, who take the action to resolve the situation. Even when he's going to encounter Esau, he sends the handmaid's children and the children of Leah ahead of the children of Rachel.

It's very clear that Rachel is the wife that really matters, and her child is more important than the others. So these issues have already been bubbling beneath the surface, and now those tensions are greatly aggravated by the actions and words of Joseph, along with the way that his father treats him. Within this chapter, then, there are a series of aggravations. First of all, he brings back a bad report on the sons of the handmaids. The bad report is language that is associated with spying. It's the spies as they go into the land of Canaan. They bring back a bad report. So he's acting as a cattle tale, a spy for his father upon the brothers, and you can imagine that serves as an aggravation.

But he's not just loved over his brothers, he's favoured over them. So you can imagine a father loving one child more than another, but treating them all equally. That's one thing. But if the father loves one child more than the other, and then favours that child, gives them greater gifts, gives them special privileges, then that is a greater aggravation. Particularly as in Joseph's case, it seems that Joseph is being treated as if he were the firstborn. So this is the second aggravation. The first one is him bringing back a bad report, acting as a tattletale for his father. And then the second one, he's being treated as the firstborn. He's being favoured over them. He's being given this tunic of many colours.

[ 7 : 26 ] And then there's the third aggravation. He has a dream. And then he tells it to his brothers. It's one thing to have a dream. It's quite another to try and put salt in a wound, and to stress his superiority and his privilege over his brothers. But that's exactly what he does. And then, as if that's not bad enough, there's a fourth aggravation, as he has a further dream, and tells it to his father, about the sun, moon, and eleven stars bowing down to him, which Jacob instantly sees that that's a reference to him, to the mother, and also to the eleven brothers. Now this raises the question of chronology, because Rachel died in chapter 35. And maybe is this text out of order? Is this something that happened a few years previously, that's setting part of the background for what happens in the later part of the chapter? It could be. But then you also have the question of why eleven stars bowing down to him, when Benjamin was not yet born. Who is the eleventh son? Could it be that Rachel is pregnant at this time, but they haven't yet moved? These are possibilities. It also could be the case that

Leah is now treated as his stepmom, or maybe Bilhah. And so, these questions of chronology are worth considering. The brothers are angry with Joseph. But it seems at this point that his father is also angry.

And you can see maybe why he's angry. He's thought of Joseph as his favoured son, and he has treated Joseph as if he were his firstborn. But now, it seems that Joseph might be getting ideas above his station. Is Jacob himself going to bow down to Joseph? Is Joseph truly loyal, or is he in it for himself?

And that question of loyalty is a common theme within Joseph's life. Loyalty is perhaps Joseph's defining trait, and also a theme that runs throughout the story. Joseph is a loyal son to his father. Then he's a loyal servant to Potiphar. Then he's a loyal prisoner within the prison, working for the guard.

Then he's finally a loyal servant and second in command to Pharaoh. And so, this question of loyalty is hanging in the background. What does good loyalty look like? Is Joseph really loyal, or is his apparent loyalty just a means to an end of his self-serving? Is he able to be loyal when loyalty will be costly to him? Is he able to be loyal when being loyal might make him appear disloyal? All of these are questions throughout the story of Joseph, and we need to be attentive to this theme.

[ 10 : 00 ] The events described then may have occurred before they moved to Hebron. But when he is sent out to his brothers, they have moved to Hebron by that point. Joseph is sent by Jacob to his brothers to see whether things are peaceful with them. But yet, a few verses earlier, we've been told that his brothers cannot speak peacefully to him. We might then ask the question of whether Jacob is testing Joseph. Is he trying to see whether Joseph is truly loyal by sending him on a mission that appears dangerous and seeing whether he will go ahead? Now, the interesting thing is he's sent on this mission to a particular location, and the brothers are not in the location. Indeed, they're 50 miles further on, and it's only by chance, an encounter with this man while he's wandering in the field, that he discovers that they have gone on to Dothan. This man just happened to overhear their plans. There is then the possibility that Jacob is setting up a test of loyalty. There are ominous themes here. When he speaks to

Joseph, Joseph says, here I am. It's the same language that Abraham uses to God when God tests him. Shechem is an ominous site too. It seems that they still have association with the area, even after they've moved on. But there has been a bloodbath there. The brothers have massacred the Shechemites.

And then there are echoes of the testing of Abraham here. Does Abraham fear God? Does Joseph fear and honour his father enough to undertake a dangerous mission? And as we go through the text, we'll see a lot of other echoes of the story of Abraham. They see him afar off. There's the statement, do not lay your hand upon the lad. And then they lift up their eyes and they see an alternative, the Ishmaelites coming towards them, just as Abraham lifted up his eyes and he saw the ram caught in the thicket. So there's something of the story of Abraham playing out here beneath the surface.

As I mentioned, a story beneath the story. But it's not the only one that's playing out here. There's also the story of Hagar and Ishmael that we saw in chapter 21. In that story, Hagar is sent out with a skin of wine and some bread on her shoulder. And the word for shoulder is the same word as is used being sent towards Shechem. She wanders in the wilderness and is lost, much as Joseph ends up wandering in the field before he is met by this man who directs him in the direction that he needs to go to see his brothers. The water in the skin is empty. Later on, the water in the pit is empty. They cast down Joseph into the pit. Ishmael is cast down beneath the bush. And then Hagar goes at a distance so that she will not see her son die. And the brothers, reading between the lines of the text, go at some distance from Joseph so they can't hear and see him in order to have this meal together. Then, lo and behold, who comes on the scene? But Ishmaelites, connecting again the story of Joseph with the story of Ishmael. They bring him down to Egypt. In chapter 21, that's where Hagar and Ishmael went after they were delivered by the angel. And then, as they go down to Egypt,

Ishmael marries there and settles there, just as Joseph ends up doing. So there are all these parallels between the story of Joseph and the story of Hagar and Ishmael. We've already seen some with the story of Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac. But now there's another set. A further thing to notice, camels come from Gilead. Now, where have we seen Gilead before? We've seen Gilead in the story of Laban's pursuit of Jacob. And at Gilead, Rachel is seated upon the camel and she hides the teraphim when it's searched and a death sentence is cast upon her. We'll return to that story in a moment.

[ 13 : 55 ] But here it's important just to notice these stories beneath the story. These ways in which previous events are coming to the surface, coming to the surface in ways that disclose deeper meaning within this text. We'll get to one final background text in a moment. But who took Joseph out of the pit?

It seems, in most people's understanding, that it was the brothers. But yet in this translation, it captures something more of the original text, which suggests that it was not the brothers, but the Midianites who took Joseph out of the pit. Now, the Midianites seem to be a different group from the Ishmaelites. And the Midianites take Joseph out of the pit and they sell him to the Ishmaelites. Now, what appears to be the case is that Joseph is out of the sight of the brothers, out of hearing, and they see the Ishmaelites coming from a distance and they think we'll sell him to the Ishmaelites. But maybe on the other side of the hill, the Midianites come across this pit with this lad within it, take him out, and then they bring the lad to the Ishmaelites, sell him to the Ishmaelites, and then the Ishmaelites bring him down into Egypt with the caravan. Reuben, has Reuben been away from his brothers? Probably not. He's been eating with his brothers. He's the first to the pit. He arrives at the pit and he sees that it's empty. It's a crisis. And so he goes to the brothers and brings them the news of the situation, which they did not know beforehand. This is an unexpected development. And so they have to come across a different plan in order to deal with this turn in events. They've already gone through a series of different plans. The first plan was to kill him and cast him in a pit. Then Reuben suggests to save his life that they cast him into a pit and abandon him there. And then Judas suggests that they sell him to the Ishmaelites. So maybe if they were given a bit more time, they would have rejected all those plans and delivered him. But the time was not afforded to them. And the Ishmaelites took Joseph down into Egypt as he was sold to them by the Midianites. It's worth bearing in mind some of the chance occurrences that happen within this text. First of all, we've had this random person in the fields in Shechem who's overheard the plans of the brothers and is able to give it to Joseph.

What is that character doing there? What bad luck for Joseph? And then later on, we have another situation where there just happens to be these Midianites on the scene, completely unbeknownst to the brothers.

Once again, it might appear that Joseph is just having very bad luck or things just aren't working out for him. And Reuben, although Reuben was going to deliver him, can't actually fulfill that plan.

But when we go further on in the story, Joseph tells his brothers that whatever their intention, God had an intention for him to go down to Egypt. And in these sorts of events and details of the story, there's a suggestion that there's some other hand involved, some providential purpose that's leading these chance occurrences to the end of Joseph going down into Egypt and going down into Egypt in a significant manner, in a way that will bring all these resonances of previous stories.

[17:13] He's cast into a pit. Later on, he will be cast into another thing described as a pit, the dungeon, which suggests that we're supposed to hold these two things together, that there's a parallel between the two of them. Now, when the brothers later talk about the actions that they did concerning Joseph, they lament the fact that they did not listen to his cries, not that they sold him, which is interesting. Joseph may have thought that they sold him, but it does not seem to be the case that they actually sold him directly. They set up the situation so they were responsible for the act of selling him down into Egypt, but they do not seem to have been the ones that received the money.

The plan now becomes, this is the fourth plan that they've arrived at, that they take the robe of Joseph and put the blood of a goat on it and present it to their father and see whether he recognizes it, that he acknowledges that it belongs to his son. And so they do that. Now, again, there's a story playing in the background here. Once again, we are seeing a story of a goat and a coat and of a father being deceived concerning his favoured son. The sons are using the same sort of deception that Jacob used with his father Isaac, where he used a goat to disguise the fact that he was not the favoured son. And he wore his brother's garment. And so he's being deceived in the same way. There's another thing going on here. The garment is presented with this bloodied garment. And this is maybe reminiscent of Rachel and the teraphim. If she had gotten up, what would you have seen? A bloodied garment.

And the words that Jacob uses at this point again hearken back to that event where the teraphim were taken. He says, teroph, teraph. He's surely torn. And that reference would seem, put those words together, what do you get? Teraphim. There seems to be some parallel, some way in which it's playing off that earlier story. The camels have come from Gilead and they're going to take this son of Rachel and they're going to bring him into Egypt. This death sentence that was cast upon the mother is coming back to haunt the child. And we'll see again later on in the story that a similar thing happens to Benjamin. These stories in the background are important then. So there's the story of the mother, the story of Rachel playing in the background, and the death sentence that was cast over the person who had the teraphim at Gilead and she was seated upon the camel. Now the camel has come from Gilead and the torn son reminds of the teraphim. The next story in the background is the story of Isaac being deceived by Jacob. And now Jacob is deceived by his sons concerning his favoured son using a goat and a coat. And then there's a third story. That third story is the story of Abraham and his being tested by God in Genesis chapter 22. A number of references to that. And then the final story is the story of Hagar and Ishmael. And that story I think is particularly important. In the story of Hagar and

Ishmael we have an Egyptian maidservant that is eventually cast out. And the casting out of this son is a tragic event and there's a lot of injustice in that event. But now we see a son of Jacob who is associated with the characters of Hagar and Ishmael. And he is sent down into Egypt. He's sent down into Egypt with the Ishmaelites. There's an association between them here. And it will only be as Israel starts to see itself in the characters of Hagar and Ishmael that they will be able to be released, delivered and enter into the promised land. They will have to, as Hagar was an Egyptian maidservant, afflicted as a servant and a stranger within the land and the household of the Hebrews, the Hebrews will have to be afflicted as strangers within the land of Egypt. And as they see themselves in that position, they will be redeemed. And they will bring that pattern to full completion.

There will be a redemption of Hagar and Ishmael in some sense through this story. The story of Joseph going down to Egypt is a story that casts a shadow into the New Testament as well. Jesus is born as the son of Joseph, the son of Jacob. Again, we've seen a character called Joseph the son of Jacob before.

[ 21 : 49 ] And yet Jesus' father is called that name. He has dreams and he takes his son down into Egypt to deliver him and then brings him back to the land later on. Jesus is the Messiah who visits his brethren. He's hated by them. He's betrayed, sold into the hands of the Gentiles. And he's ultimately brought down to the pit. There's a conspiracy and betrayal with his brother Judas or Judah. He's rejected and expelled by his brethren, his people, and they cast him out. He's sold for pieces of silver. He's stripped of his robe. He descends into the pit, but later rises again from the dead.

He rises up, sits at the right hand of power. He delivers his brethren and his brethren bow to him. The story of Joseph then provides a paradigm for understanding the story of Christ.

Two questions to consider. First of all, in Deuteronomy chapter 21 verses 15 to 17, we find a law that seems to reflect upon this story in Genesis. What insights can this law give us concerning the story? And what are some of the ways in which it picks up upon the language of Genesis in this chapter and elsewhere? The second question. What are some of the parallels between this story and the story of David in 1 Samuel chapter 17? And what might these parallels teach us?