

Introduction

You may recall that at the beginning of our study of Genesis, we noted that there are 10 major sections to the book. Each begins with the phrase “this is the history of” or “these are the generations of.” The last section begins with chapter 37, and it covers Jacob’s son Joseph. You can see that the major part of the book (chapters 12 to 50) are given over to the history of Abraham’s family to the fourth generation.

I. Introduction to Joseph, Genesis 37**A. Joseph Hated, 37:1-11**

There were four reasons that Joseph’s brothers hated him. They are: a) he brought a bad report of some of the brothers back to their father (37:2); b) Their father loved Joseph more than the other sons (37:3-4); c) Joseph had a dream that his brothers would bow down to him (37:5-8); and d) Joseph had another dream that his father, mother, and brothers would bow down to him (37:9-11).

You can imagine the seething anger that they had toward their kid brother. He was arrogant, they thought, and a tattler, and somehow was “father’s pet.”

B. Joseph Thrown into a Pit, 37:12-24

As a result of their hatred, they wanted to kill Joseph. Even while he was coming on a mission from their father Israel (Jacob) to see if all was well with them, they expressed this murderous desire. Reuben stopped them from killing the boy and had them throw him into a hole in the ground instead, because he planned later to rescue Joseph.

C. Joseph Sold as a Slave, 37:25-36

While Reuben was gone, however, some Ishmaelite traders came by on their way to Egypt. The other brothers hatched a plan to sell Joseph into slavery. This way, they won’t kill him, they will make some money, and they will get rid of him for good.

After Reuben discovers that Joseph is gone, they splatter blood on the multi-colored tunic and send it back to their father to deceive him into thinking that Joseph is dead (no DNA testing was available back then to prove it was not Joseph’s blood!). This charade goes on for years, and Jacob mourned for many days for his son.

Meanwhile, Joseph was sold as a slave to Potiphar, a high-ranking officer in the Egyptian Pharaoh’s army.

II. Interlude: Sordid Details Regarding Judah, Genesis 38

Here we have the ugly story of Judah’s incest with his daughter-in-law. Here is the basic family structure:

Judah + Shua’s daughter have three children:

1. Er
2. Onan
3. Shelah

Er then married Tamar, but Er was wicked and the LORD took his life. In order to maintain Er’s name and inheritance, Judah asked Onan to marry Tamar

and have children. The first son would be accounted as the heir of Er. This is an early instance of the Levirate marriage custom which we see in more detail in the book of Ruth.

Onan, however, did not want to obey his father and have a child that would not be his own heir. So, the Lord took his life also.

This leaves Tamar without any husband, though she has had two already! So Judah tells her that he will give her his third son Shelah once he is old enough. Presumably this was going to take a few years. You can see the importance of the inheritance in the culture of this day, because Tamar went back to her family’s home to wait for this to happen. It seems that she wore “widow’s garments” to indicate that a) she was a widow; and b) perhaps also that she was not “available.”

Some time passed and Shua’s daughter, Judah’s wife, died. In the meanwhile, Shelah had grown up, but had not been given to Tamar. She was irked, to say the least. Judah had not kept his word. So she took matters into her own hands in a way that was certainly not appropriate. She pretended to be a prostitute and trapped Judah. She took a pledge of his possessions from him as a guarantee of future payment. Judah could not find her later, however, to give her the goat from the flock as payment.

When it is discovered that Tamar is pregnant a few months later, Judah is outraged and commands that she be killed for her obvious sin. She then brings out the items that Judah gave her in pledge of the future payment and he acknowledges that indeed it was him. So then we have this family structure:

Judah + Tamar have twins:

1. Perez, the second twin
2. Zerah, the first twin

Thus ends the chapter. Sick things have been happening ever since man has been a sinner.

III. Joseph Unjustly Imprisoned, Genesis 39

In verses 1-6, we see that Joseph was raised to a position of prominence in Potiphar’s house because of administrative and leadership skills which the Lord had given to him. Note that the Lord’s presence with Joseph is that which caused him to be successful. Potiphar partook of God’s blessing on account of Joseph as well, and assigned stewardship for all his goods to Joseph. He did not have to check up or audit Joseph’s work because he knew Joseph was an honest man.

But Joseph had one liability—good looks. Potiphar’s wife tried to lure him into an illicit relationship, but he would not buckle to her seductions. He realized that to do so was sin not only against his master, himself, and the woman, but most importantly it would be sin against God. Joseph continued about his work, ignoring Potiphar’s wife, but she cornered him one day and took his outer garment. When he fled from her to avoid sin, she then turned on him and lied about the whole situation to cover up her lust and unfaithfulness to her husband. Nice character, huh? This does teach us to avoid situations where we are in private spaces alone with someone of the opposite sex that is not our spouse. It is dangerous—don’t do it! Not only can it lead us into sin, it can be used against us as it was with Joseph.

Upon hearing his wife’s story, Potiphar became angry with Joseph and had him thrown into prison. The Lord was still with Joseph, however, and his skills were noted by the headmaster of the prison, who made Joseph an administrator over the prison.

In both cases, in high office or in low estate, Joseph relied on God and was prospered because of his relationship to the Lord. May it be so for us.

IV. Joseph Left in Prison, Genesis 40

After some time in the prison, Pharaoh's butler and baker were thrown into jail on suspicion of perhaps treason or some other charge. After being put into Joseph's care, both men had a dream.

The butler's dream was had to do with a fruitful grapevine and providing the cup of wine to Pharaoh. Joseph, who was informed by God as to the interpretation of the dream, told the butler that within three days he would be out of prison and back to his place of prominence before the Pharaoh. Joseph simply asked that the butler not forget Joseph, and bring his case before the Pharaoh.

The baker had a dream about baskets on his head out of which the birds ate. Joseph interpreted this dream to mean that in the same three days, the baker would be hanged and his body left for the scavenging birds. This seems to indicate that the baker was culpable for whatever plot or crime Pharaoh had heard about. The butler was innocent.

The sad note of the story from Joseph's perspective was that the butler forgot Joseph—for two long years!

V. Joseph Delivered from Prison and Promoted, Genesis 41

Pharaoh also had dreams—two dreams that the Egyptian wise men could not interpret. When it seemed that no one would be able to figure them out, the butler remembered Joseph, the dream-interpreter, and told Pharaoh that he might be able to interpret the dreams.

So, Joseph got cleaned up and went before Pharaoh. He admitted that his insight into dream-interpretation was not from himself, but from God. Both dreams had to do with seven years of plenty and seven years of famine. Joseph counseled that Pharaoh should open an agriculture department and take a 20% tax off the years of plenty so that there would be enough in the years of famine.

In verses 37-38, Pharaoh thought the advice was great, and said there was no one better to put in charge of the matter than Joseph, who had the Spirit of God. So Joseph immediately took the office of second-in-command to Pharaoh. What a promotion!

By this time, Joseph was 30 years of age. He has a couple of children in the midst of the first seven years during which he was implementing his plan to save grain for the coming famine. These two children would later be "adopted" by his father Jacob so that they are numbered among the tribes of Israel. Joseph is "replaced" as it were, by his two sons, so he received a double portion. Levi is out of the inheritance because of the priesthood, so we are still left with 12 tribes.

The famine does indeed come, and not only does Joseph help the Egyptians, but also those of surrounding nations who suffered from the same famine. This sets the stage for a reunion of sorts between Joseph and his brothers and father in the next chapters, and for the whole "nation of Israel" to move to Egypt during the latter part of the famine. This in turn sets the stage for the book of Exodus, some hundreds of years later, when Israel was in bondage in Egypt.

One Note

By the way, don't assign importance to dreams like these Egyptians did. They *were* revelations from God, but we don't receive such today. MAP