

SUNDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY  
Genesis 37 – Joseph Sold into Slavery

# JOSEPH AND THE AMAZING TECHNICOLOR DREAMCOAT

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## Outline of the Story of Joseph:

|                  |   |   |
|------------------|---|---|
| Genesis 37       | Joseph is sold into Egypt                   | *Joseph has two dreams                  |
| Genesis 38       | Judah and Tamar                             |   |
| Genesis 39:1-19  | Joseph and Potiphar                         | A                                       |
| Genesis 39:20-40 | Joseph in Prison                            | B *His fellow prisoners have two dreams |
| Genesis 41       | Joseph in the Palace                        | C *Pharaoh has two dreams               |
| Genesis 42       | First visit of Joseph's family to Egypt     | A'                                      |
| Genesis 43-45    | Second visit of Joseph's family to Egypt    | B'                                      |
| Genesis 46-47    | Third visit of Joseph's family to Egypt     | C'                                      |
| Genesis 48-50    | The last days and words of Jacob and Joseph |   |

*By the end of the book, we have to ask the question: But what about the land promised to Abraham and to Isaac and to Jacob? Why does Joseph and family return to Egypt after burying their father in Hebron, in the cave of the field at Machpelah? And why does Genesis end with Joseph being embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt?*

**The General Plot:** *As Joseph is Jacob's favorite son, born to his favorite wife, Rachel, Jacob makes a long robe with sleeves. Joseph then receives strange dreams in which he is more important than his brothers. This leads to their envy and Joseph finds himself in ever-deeper trouble. They sell him into slavery and he is taken into Egypt where he is falsely accused of adultery and ends up in prison for life. Then, with divine help, the tide changes. He uses his gift to interpret dreams to help royal officials, then Pharaoh himself. He is made prime minister, and in the great famine that follows, his brothers come into his power. But instead of doing to them what they had done to him, he forgives them and brings his father down to Egypt to live in peace and prosperity. The drama ends with the family reunited. Through ups and downs, successes and failures, God has directed the course of events, overcoming all obstacles, so that God's promises will be fulfilled.*

### Genesis 37 (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. <sup>2</sup> **This is the story of the family of Jacob.** Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. <sup>3</sup> **Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age;** and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. <sup>4</sup> **But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.** <sup>5</sup> Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. <sup>6</sup> He said to them, "Listen to this dream that I

dreamed. <sup>7</sup> There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf.” <sup>8</sup> His brothers said to him, “Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?” So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words. <sup>9</sup> He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, “Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” <sup>10</sup> But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, “What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?” <sup>11</sup> So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind. <sup>12</sup> **Now his brothers went to pasture their father’s flock near Shechem.** <sup>13</sup> **And Israel said to Joseph, “Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.” He answered, “Here I am.”** <sup>14</sup> **So he said to him, “Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me.” So he sent him from the valley of Hebron. He came to Shechem,** <sup>15</sup> **and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, “What are you seeking?”** <sup>16</sup> **“I am seeking my brothers,” he said; “tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock.”** <sup>17</sup> **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.** <sup>18</sup> **They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him.** <sup>19</sup> They said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer. <sup>20</sup> Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.” <sup>21</sup> **But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.”** <sup>22</sup> **Reuben said to them, “Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him”—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father.** <sup>23</sup> So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; <sup>24</sup> **and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.** <sup>25</sup> **Then they sat down to eat;** and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. <sup>26</sup> Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? <sup>27</sup> Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers agreed. <sup>28</sup> **When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit,** and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt. <sup>29</sup> **When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes.** <sup>30</sup> **He returned to his brothers, and said, “The boy is gone; and I, where can I turn?”** <sup>31</sup> Then they took Joseph’s robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. <sup>32</sup> They had the long robe with sleeves taken to their father, and they said, “This we have found; see now whether it is your son’s robe or not.” <sup>33</sup> He recognized it, and said, “It is my son’s robe! A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.” <sup>34</sup> Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. <sup>35</sup> All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, “No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.” Thus his father bewailed him. <sup>36</sup> **Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard.**

**Source Theory:** J Source – normal; E source = **Bold**; P Source = *italicized*; Redactor = ***Bold Italicized***

## **CHAPTER 37 – JOSEPH SOLD INTO SLAVERY**

This story plays up the theme of sibling rivalry that we have already witnessed throughout Genesis (Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, and now Joseph and his eleven brothers). Once again, we have brothers at loggerheads from their earliest days. In time, these twelve brothers will become the twelve tribes of Israel and Joseph will play a vital role in his family’s survival. The story of Joseph sets us up for the story of the Exodus by providing a plot line that gets the whole family into Egypt.

**Vs. 1-4** Joseph is 17 years old and he is serving as a helper to four of his brothers, the sons of his father’s wife’s servants, Bilhah and Zilpah. Because he is Jacob’s favorite (and receives a special long robe with sleeves) his brothers hate him and treat him poorly.

**Vs. 5-11** Joseph has two dreams in which his brothers and then his father and mother bow down to him; a foreshadowing of what is to come. Again, the hatred of his brothers grows.

**Vs. 12-24** Jacob sends Joseph to check on the ten brothers and catches up with them at Dothan, which is fourteen miles north of Shechem on the main route used by merchants and herdsman going north to the Jezreel Valley. The brothers, still angry over his dreams and favored status, plan to kill Joseph, but Reuben convinces them to throw him alive into a pit. The pit was probably a cistern that was hollowed out of the limestone bedrock and lined with plaster to store rain water that were used in the dry months to provide water for humans and animals. When they were empty, they sometimes served as temporary cells for prisoners (see Jeremiah 38:6).

**Jeremiah 38:6 (NRSV)**

*<sup>6</sup> So they took Jeremiah and threw him into the cistern of Malchiah, the king's son, which was in the court of the guard, letting Jeremiah down by ropes. Now there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud.*

**Vs. 21-22** (E Source) It is Reuben who saves Joseph from the brother's plan to kill him, but in verses 26-27 (J Source), it is Judah who saves him from death. This fits with the concentration on and favoritism toward Judah in the J Source in general.

**Vs. 25-35** They decide to sell Joseph to a band of Ishmaelite traders for twenty pieces of silver (twenty shekels; which is about two years of wages) and deceive their father, telling him that Joseph was killed and eaten by a wild animal, by dipping his robe in the blood of a goat.

**Vs. 36** Notice who receives him and then who sells him in verse 36: *"Meanwhile, the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard."* What's the difference between or the relationship between the Ishmaelites and Midianites (see Judges 8:24).

In the J Source, the Ishmaelites bring Joseph to Egypt and sell him to Potiphar; in the E Source, it is the Midianites. (They are also referred to as Medanites. Note that the births of both Midian and Medan come from E; see Genesis 25:2, 4). The Redactor combined these by making it appear that the Midianites sell him to the Ishmaelites, who then sell him in Egypt. But this still leaves a contradiction, because v. 36 (E Source) still says that the Midianites (or Medanites) sell him to Potiphar, but 39:1 (J Source) says that "Potiphar... bought him from the hand of the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there."

In the J Source, in order to get the blessing intended for Esau, Jacob deceives their father by using his brother's cloak and the meat and hide of a goat. Now, in the same source, the brothers deceive their father by using their brother's coat dipped in the blood of a goat. This is one of a series of paybacks for deception that form a chain in the J Source narrative.

Second, the brothers here say, "Recognize," which is what Tamar says to Judah in the next chapter when she shows him the evidence that he is receiving a payback for having deceived her (see Gen 38:25).

Third, in the J Source, the brothers (not the Midianites) sell Joseph for *twenty* weights of silver. Later, Joseph will arrange to have *twenty* portions of silver returned to their grain sacks (nine portions on the first return, eleven portions on the second return), again hinting at the ironic payback to the brothers' deception.

Many scholars still refer to a Joseph "novella," which they regard as a united work coming from a distinct source. However, the fact that J and E can be identified and distinguished in the Joseph story show this "novella" view to be incorrect. The connections between the Jacob and Joseph stories in the J Source, i.e. the chain of paybacks for deceptions, also show that the Joseph story is not independent; it is intricately linked to its context in the J Source.

**THE FAMILY TREE OF THE DESCENDANTS OF ABRAHAM  
LEADING TO THE TWELVE TRIBES OF ISRAEL**

