

1-1-2016

The Role of Genesis 37:1-11 in the Joseph Novella

Andy Walker
awalkit@hotmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>

Recommended Citation

Walker, Andy (2016) "The Role of Genesis 37:1-11 in the Joseph Novella," *Leaven*: Vol. 24: Iss. 4, Article 3.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol24/iss4/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

The Role of Genesis 37.1–11 in the Joseph Novella

Andy Walker

Joseph is a major character in the book of Genesis. The narrative about Joseph (chapters 37–50) is the largest story in the book of Genesis and is often termed the *Joseph novella*. Genesis 37.1–11 is a crucial part of the novella since it introduces Joseph and sets the course for the entire story. It is easy to read over this chapter in English and miss out on some of the original rich language and key narrative pieces. We will always be rewarded if we heed Jesus’s advice that “he who has ears, let him hear,” and I encourage a fuller reading that pays careful attention to the details and the rhetorical flow of this portion of the chapter. The author has included subtle details that are key to understanding the story and attention to these details will animate this story and bring it to life.

One of the key themes of the Joseph novella is that Joseph is *chosen*. From the beginning, it is no secret that Jacob chooses Joseph over his brothers. Then YHWH chooses Joseph to keep the people of Israel alive during a terrible famine. Finally, Jacob even chooses Joseph’s two sons to be included in the twelve tribes. Genesis 37.1–11 introduces this theme and what it means in the life of Joseph.

Before reading a passage of Scripture, it is important to be attentive to the genre of literature. The Joseph novella is a story, and stories have certain elements. All stories have characters, whether good or bad. In Scripture it is always important to remember that YHWH is a main character even if he is not explicitly mentioned. Then there is the narrator, who is our access to the story. Without narrators, we would know nothing so we must pay attention to the words he has chosen and the way he arranges those words. Those words are clues to his purpose in telling the story. Most stories also have a plotline. Usually a situation is introduced, some kind of crisis arises, and a solution brings the story to a resolution. Finally, the reader must bring imagination to the story. With it, we can visualize and play out the story in our minds as we read.

The Joseph novella contains mystery, intrigue, sibling rivalry, attempted murder, slavery, prison, forgiveness, and faithfulness. Anything but boring, it is one of the most beautifully told stories in all of Scripture. The story begins in the land of Canaan. Up to this point, Jacob has not put down permanent roots. His life has been a journey, in more ways than simply a geographical relocation. Now Jacob has settled in the land where his father sojourned, the land of Canaan. Notice that verse 1 contrasts Jacob settling versus Isaac sojourning. YHWH’s promise of land, protection, and blessing is beginning to become more of a reality in Jacob.

Genesis 37 focuses on Jacob’s son Joseph and in verse 2 is the last *toledot* clause in Genesis. The word *toledot* means “descendants” or “generations.” Typical idiomatic Semitism is employed to reveal Joseph’s age: “son of seventeen years.” The author seeks to give us a time frame in Joseph’s life and what he was doing at this period of his life. A quick reading of most English translations might lead us to overlook another possible reading of 37.2 as their interpretations are all a variation of “Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers.” This makes most sense in English but the Hebrew suggests another reading. The Hebrew word order is as follows: He [Joseph] was shepherding his brothers, along with the flock.” Could it be the case that Joseph was in charge of his brothers? It is interesting to note that it was the sons of Bilhah (Dan, Naphtali) and Zilpah (Gad, Asher), the secondary wives of his father, whom he was shepherding. You might remember that Bilhah was the maid of Rachel while Zilpah was the maid of Leah. The author seems to be building a case that Joseph had a higher

status than his brothers (even though they were older) and there is evidence his brothers believed that as well when they later wondered if he would rule (*malak*) and be master (*mashal*) over them (37.8).

Genesis 37.2 also contains a note that Joseph was “helper” to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah. The word translated “helper” or sometimes “young lad” is the Hebrew word *na’ar*. *Na’ar* carries a wide range of meanings in its two hundred Old Testament occurrences.¹ It is used of the infant Moses in Exodus 2.6. Ziba is called a *na’ar* even though he has fifteen sons and was obviously not young when David summoned him (2 Sam 9.2–12; 16.1–4; 19.17, 29). For years, longtime Lipscomb and Amridge professor Rodney Cloud has proposed that there is more to the meaning of *na’ar* than simply “young lad” or “helper.” He argues that the word can also describe an apprentice, protégé, or someone in training. If we apply his proposal, it is possible that the narrator is telling us that Joseph is something like a sheik in training. If the author is using *na’ar* to tell us that Joseph is young, it is redundant for his age is already specified as seventeen. However, if *na’ar* is referring to Joseph’s position, then the narrator is providing pertinent information for the development of the story. The narrator also reveals that Joseph brought a bad report about his brothers (v. 2). Through our Western eyes, we might be tempted to view Joseph as some kind of tattletale but if he is in charge of his brothers, then he was simply doing his job.

Genesis 37.3 introduces another piece of important information necessary to the plotline: “Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons.” Jacob was not secret about his preference for Rachel and this passage tells us that he made no secret of his affinity toward Joseph, the elder son of his favorite wife. Joseph has a relationship with his father that his other brothers do not have. Considering Jacob’s negative experience with sibling rivalry, it is surprising that he is creating the very same issue among his own children but it is recorded that Jacob “loved Joseph because he was the son of old age.” The phrase *son of old age* is an idiomatic expression and here it could refer to Joseph being conceived during Jacob’s advanced years. We know from Genesis 29.31, that Rachel was barren and many years likely passed before she was able to conceive. When she did, she named her son *Joseph* (“he increases”), saying, “May Yahweh *add* to me another son” (30.24, emphasis added). Therefore, the idea of him being the “son of Jacob’s old age” suggests that he was special and had been long anticipated by Jacob.

However, the phrase *son of old age* could refer to something besides Joseph’s age. The word *son* is often used in Hebrew to mean, “having characteristics of.” For instance, the Hebrew literally says Joseph was the “son of seventeen years” in verse 2. The narrator could be saying that Joseph has the characteristics of a person of old age in the sense that he is very mature for his age. This might explain why Joseph was shepherding his brothers, along with the flock.

Continuing the story, the narrator adds, “so he [Jacob] made him a *special robe*” (v. 3, emphasis added). The word *ketonet* refers to a “coat,” “tunic,” or “long sleeved shirt-like garment.”² The only other Old Testament occurrence of this phrase occurs in 2 Samuel 13.18–19 describing the royal robe that Tamar tore after Amnon sexually assaulted her. Most English translations give one of two meanings to this garment. First, most believe this garment to be a “coat of many colors.”³ This developed from the *Septuagint* translation. The second reading follows the RSV description of “a long robe with sleeves.”⁴ Identifying what kind of garment is less important than the response of Joseph’s brothers to the garment. We have no way of knowing whether the garment was colorful or long, but we do know *why* it was given: the robe was given as evidence that Joseph was superior to his brothers.

As we might suspect, when Joseph’s brothers *saw* the evidence of their father’s favoritism for Joseph, their response was predictable: “they hated him and were not able to speak peaceably to him” (v. 4). These first four verses introduce the character of Joseph and set the scene. It is possible that Joseph is a supervisor over his brothers. In addition to being in a leadership role, he is the favorite son of his father. Aside from the possibility of simply being an equal among his brothers (and giving the bad report), Joseph has done nothing aggressive to

1. F. Eugene Brown presented a thorough study of *na’ar* in his master’s thesis, “The Role and Status of Na’ar in the Old Testament” (master’s thesis, David Lipscomb University, 1991).

2. HALOT; BDB in Accordance Bible Software under *ketonet*.

3. Colorful clothing would be consistent with portraits of colored clothing worn seen in the Beni-hasan tomb painting or the mural fresco in the palace of Zimri-Lim at Mari. See Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 409.

4. Victor Hamilton reveals that the RSV was influenced by Aquila’s reading of *passim* as *astragalon*, meaning “a frock reaching to the ankles” (Hamilton, 407).

forward his own cause: he has only received a coat and love from his father, but in return he has received hate from his brothers (37.3–4).

As if things were not bad enough, Joseph has two dreams that escalate the sibling rivalry. Joseph recounts his first dream to his brothers: “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” (v. 7). The only distinction is between *your* sheaves and *my* sheaf (37.6–8). Up to this point, the narrator has suggested that Joseph enjoys privilege over his brothers but now his brothers begin to acknowledge the same. Notice that Joseph does not interpret the dream for his brothers. The brothers responded with their interpretation, “Will you really reign over us? Will you really rule over us?” It is difficult to determine whether these are rhetorical questions or whether they are sardonic in tone. Perhaps they were challenging the idea that Joseph would rule or perhaps they were laughingly dismissing its likelihood. Nevertheless they hated Joseph even more because of the dream that he dreamed.

Then Joseph dreams a second dream: “Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me” (v. 9). In the first dream there is no emphasis on numbers but in the second dream there are numbers of constellations (one sun, one moon, eleven stars). On one hand, the narrator tells us that both dreams were interpreted by characters other than Joseph (the first by his brothers; the second by Jacob). This may be significant because in the Joseph novella, Joseph is presented as the competent dream interpreter (40.8; 41.28, 32). Therefore, we should approach the interpretation of Joseph’s brothers and father with caution and be open to the possibility that the dreams have been misinterpreted.

On the other hand, this may be a foreshadowing of a later role Joseph would serve. There’s a similar foreshadowing in the Exodus story as Moses’s forty-year shepherding in Midian prepared him to lead Israel in the same wilderness for forty years. Could these verses of Genesis 37 be foreshadowing a later reality in Joseph’s life? So far Abraham and many of his descendants have experienced some form of divine oracle related to their future fates. First YHWH assured Abraham of descendants with the stars and a smoking firepot and later appeared to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18. Later YHWH also appeared to Rebekah (25.23). Now the same appears to be true for Joseph, except he receives revelation about himself (and not his children).

It is true that celestial bodies can take on divine connotation in the Bible, and Joseph’s brothers and father certainly assume they represent lordship in this text. One sun, one moon, and eleven stars were *bowing* to Joseph. Jacob quickly noticed that their number matched the number of members of their family.⁵ When Joseph recounted the dream to his father, Jacob was not pleased and rebuked him. It appears that Jacob interpreted the dream by matching up the celestial bodies with himself, Rachel, and the eleven siblings and believed the dream to be condescending: “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?” It is interesting that Jacob mentions “your mother” in the sequence because Rachel has been dead for some time (35.19). Either the historical sequence is not chronological or Jacob uses Rachel (“your mother”) to cast doubt on the likelihood that the dream has any reality. (“So I, your brothers, and your dead mother will one day bow down to you?!) If the latter is true, Jacob most likely intended to cast doubt on the likelihood of the dream ever being a reality. After all, how could Rachel ever bow down if she is dead?

At this point in the novella, the dreams are revelatory but not as we might expect. The greater divine purpose of the dreams is revealed later in the story as Joseph rises through the ranks in Egypt. This most likely explains why Jacob “kept this matter in his mind” as it hints that he wonders if the dreams will come true. However, the dreams also reveal why Joseph’s brothers depose him. The story continues in verses 12–36 with the sibling rivalry reaching a boiling point. Joseph’s brothers have had enough and they plot to assassinate him. Thankfully, his brothers show some sense of restraint and instead devise a plan to depose Joseph by selling him into slavery. In the introduction, the dreams explain why Joseph is mistreated.

So what reflections can we make from Genesis 37.1–11? One safeguard that can keep expositors aligned with the context is to direct all applications through both a worm’s-eye and bird’s-eye view of Scripture. Genesis 37.1–11 can be viewed through three contexts: the context of the Joseph novella, the context of the book of Genesis, and the canonical context.

5. Not counting Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah, and assuming that Benjamin was born.

This passage plays an important part in the novella as it introduces the story. Joseph is an exceptional teenager and his father's favorite, as evidenced by his supervisorial position and his garment. In addition, he is the seer of the family but his dreams are offensive to his brothers. These key pieces of information set up the major crisis of the plot while at the same time foreshadowing the role Joseph will serve for his people.

The storyline is held together with a clever literary tension throughout the life of Joseph. He is continuously in the hands of a caregiver while simultaneously being exposed to the dangers of those who wish to kill him. In the beginning, his father loves him while his brothers despise and actively search for ways to kill him. Then in other parts of the narrative, YHWH's hand cares for Joseph as Potiphar's wife, Potiphar, prison, and Pharaoh threaten him. Yet, during these tense times, Joseph is a faithful servant. He shepherds his father's flocks (and his brothers), he is over the care of Potiphar's house, he manages the prison, and he manages the state of Egypt.

There are three important themes that can be observed in Genesis 37.1–11. Joseph is chosen by Jacob, Potiphar, Pharaoh, and ultimately by YHWH. Joseph's *chosen-ness* also leads to suffering in his life. His brothers hate him and sell him into slavery while Potiphar has him incarcerated. However, as mentioned earlier, Joseph is a faithful servant, even in times of suffering. Joseph's chosen-ness, suffering, and faithful servanthood all work together in the story. Joseph faithfully serves his earthly masters, YHWH, and even the nations of Israel and Egypt as his suffering and service preserve the people during the famine. In fact, Joseph may even be the precursor to Isaiah's suffering servant.

Genesis 37.1–11 also plays a key role in the entire book of Genesis, revealing again that YHWH uses siblings to advance his greater purpose and how he does so in the most dramatic of fashions. The central issue in Genesis is God's promise to Abraham (12.1–3). The promise must overcome major obstacles, and coincidentally they are all related to the children of the patriarchs. In Abraham's case, children appear impossible since he and Sarah are barren. Yet, God fulfills the promise by giving them Isaac. The Jacob and Esau rivalry presents another potential obstacle to the divine promise but Jacob finally prevails as the greater son. Finally, the promise appears to face its greatest obstacle as Joseph's brothers depose him and a terrible famine threatens the people of Canaan. Yet, YHWH used the bad for good (50.20).

Interestingly, each story begins with some kind of divine oracle only to then introduce a potential threat that appears to extinguish the reality of the promise. YHWH tells Abraham he will have a child, Rebekah receives an oracle about Jacob, and Joseph has dreams that later become a reality as he ascends the Egyptian monarchical hierarchy. His rise to the top is also a fulfillment of another part of the Abraham promise as Joseph brings blessing to the nations. His dream interpretation and careful management of Pharaoh's affairs allowed Egypt to survive the famine while also rescuing the rest of his family. Once again the three themes of chosen-ness, suffering, and servanthood are key to the entire book of Genesis. What began with God choosing Abraham continues in Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

Lastly, Genesis 37.1–11 plays a key part in the greater story of Scripture. Genesis is the "origin" or "beginning" of the story of God's people. In a way, the Joseph novella is the "genesis" of the theme of suffering servant. Joseph is the first exemplary character to encounter suffering as his brothers and Potiphar mistreat him. However, if Joseph had not been sold into slavery, he would not have made it to Egypt. If Potiphar had not mistreated him, he would not have been imprisoned. If he had not been imprisoned, he would not have met Pharaoh and risen through the ranks. Joseph's suffering served the people of Israel well and forwarded God's story. Who would have thought a story about a dreaming teenage shepherd would be such a key chapter in the greatest story ever told?

ANDY WALKER IS A BI-VOCATIONAL MINISTER SERVING CHURCHES IN WESTERN KENTUCKY. HE EARNED A PHD IN OT THEOLOGY FROM AMRIDGE UNIVERSITY (AWALKIT@HOTMAIL.COM).

