

Genesis Session 21: Joseph and His Brothers (Genesis 37:2–38:30)

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Abstract

This session introduces the Joseph narrative in Genesis 37–38, focusing on the deep moral decline and subsequent path toward renewal for Jacob's family. It explores the rivalry and betrayal among Jacob's sons, culminating in the sale of Joseph into Egyptian slavery and the deception of their father. Concurrently, the narrative examines the story of Judah and Tamar, highlighting Judah's moral failures, Tamar's desperate bid for justice, and the birth of Perez, which establishes the messianic lineage leading to King David. Ultimately, these events illustrate how divine providence superintends human failures to work out God's sovereign covenant promises.

Outline

I. Introduction to the Joseph Narrative (Genesis 37:2–38:30)

A. Literary Framework and Catchphrase

1. Introduced with the toledoth formula "These are the generations of" (Genesis 37:2), focusing on the account of Jacob and his offspring.
2. Serves as the final narrative regarding the patriarchs, concluding the Book of Genesis.

B. Geographical and Covenantal Context

1. Concludes in Egypt (Genesis 50:22, 26), representing a forward-looking orientation where covenant promises are partially fulfilled.
2. The remainder of the Pentateuch takes place outside Canaan, pointing toward future settlement under Joshua.

C. Major Themes and Motifs

1. Ongoing themes of blessing, procreation (people), and future land inheritance.

2. Pervasive motifs of deception, betrayal, and family strife, which eventually culminate in reconciliation.
3. Absence of direct theophanies; God communicates instead through dreams and their interpretations, subtly distancing Jacob's sons from direct divine speech.

II. Characterization of Joseph

A. Interpretive Perspectives

1. View of Joseph as an ideal figure of faith and moral character, sometimes seen as a type of Jesus Christ.
2. Mathews' view of Joseph as a flawed character:
 - a. Youthful pride and arrogance.
 - b. Engaging in practices of deception and betrayal against his brothers once he achieves authority in Egypt.
 - c. Lack of perfect human typologies in Genesis; Melchizedek is the closest to a messianic type.

B. Divine Providence and Moral Renewal

1. God uses tragic events to chasten and renew the moral character of Jacob's sons.
2. Prepares the family to carry out their identity as God's treasure to bring blessing to all nations.

III. Early Conflict and the Betrayal of Joseph (Genesis 37:2–36)

A. Prominent Tribal Figures

1. Reuben (firstborn), Judah (preeminent in the south), and Joseph (father of Northern tribes Ephraim and Manasseh).

B. Joseph the Dreamer (Genesis 37:2b–11)

1. Joseph, at age 17, brings a "bad report" about his half-brothers, acting as a snitch.
2. Rivalry is fueled by maternal origins (Rachel's sons Joseph and Benjamin vs. Leah's and handmaidens' sons).
3. Jacob's favoritism toward Joseph (born in his old age) exacerbates the friction.
4. The richly ornamented/multicolored robe signifies Joseph's superior status and sparks deep hatred among the brothers.
5. Joseph's dual prophetic dreams:
 - a. First dream: Agricultural sheaves bow down to Joseph's sheaf.
 - b. Second dream: Astral bodies (sun, moon, and 11 stars) bow down to him.
 - c. Reaction: Brothers are enraged; Jacob rebukes Joseph but keeps the matter in mind.

C. The Plot, Cistern, and Sale of Joseph (Genesis 37:12–35)

1. Flocks graze near Shechem while Jacob resides in Hebron.
2. A mysterious man finds Joseph lost in Shechem and directs him to Dothan, representing the unseen hand of divine providence guiding the events.
3. Brothers plot to kill Joseph.
4. Reuben's intervention: Proposes casting Joseph into a dry cistern to secretly rescue him and return him to Jacob.
5. Judah's proposal: Recommends selling Joseph to Midianite/Ishmaelite traders to avoid direct bloodshed while gaining financial profit.
6. Deception of Jacob: Brothers dip Joseph's robe in animal blood. Jacob recognizes it, tears his clothes, puts on sackcloth, and mourns inconsolably, suspecting his sons' involvement.
7. Joseph is sold to Potiphar, an official of Pharaoh and captain of the guard in Egypt.

IV. Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38)

A. Narrative Integration and Significance

1. Not an accidental interruption, but an essential illustration of the brothers' severe moral decline, led by Judah.
2. Establishes the tribal background of King David (of the house of Judah), whose line is promised an eternal royal house (2 Samuel 7).
3. Jacob's later blessing explicitly transfers the scepter and ruling rod to Judah (Genesis 49:10).

B. Judah's Covenantal Compromises

1. Separates from his brothers and marries a Canaanite woman, disregarding the family's covenantal heritage.
2. Fathers three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah.
3. Er marries Tamar but is put to death by God for his unspecified wickedness.

C. Levirate Marriage and the Sins of Onan

1. Levirate tradition (cf. Deuteronomy 25:5–6) requires a surviving brother to raise up offspring for a deceased brother to secure inheritance and protect the widow.
2. Onan engages in sexual relations but deliberately spills his semen to avoid producing an heir (pleasure without responsibility), resulting in his death by God.
3. Judah sends Tamar back to her father's house, falsely suspecting her of being bad luck and refusing to give her Shelah.

D. Tamar's Deception and Judah's Repentance

1. Disguised as a shrine prostitute at Timnah, Tamar encounters and is impregnated by Judah.

2. Tamar secures Judah's personal identification markers—his seal, cord, and staff—as a pledge of payment.
3. Three months later, Judah orders Tamar burned alive for prostitution (prefiguring the severe penalty in Leviticus 21:9).
4. Exposure: Tamar presents Judah's seal, cord, and staff, forcing him to confess, "She is more righteous than I."
5. Judah repents of his failure to provide Shelah, and they do not have further sexual relations.

E. Birth of the Twins (Genesis 38:27–30)

1. Parallel to the Jacob-Esau birth rivalry.
2. Zerah extends his hand first and is marked with a scarlet thread, but Perez supplants him, breaking forth first.
3. Perez becomes the legal ancestor of King David, establishing the royal and messianic genealogy (as confirmed in Ruth 4).