



# Joseph

The Hidden Hand of God

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# 1

## Happy Families

Who doesn't know something about the story of Joseph? Even if it isn't familiar from school or Sunday school, most will have heard of the musical, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat*. However, this isn't a story just for children or theatrical entertainment. The story of Joseph is one of the best-told stories of all time. It is the tale of a hero who overcomes all the odds, surviving childhood and the dangers of early adulthood to become a great man of his time. It has all the elements of a gripping story – conflict, envy, murderous intentions, sexual temptation, desperate circumstances, improbable coincidences and even supernatural interventions. If we think of the story of Joseph only in these terms, however, we shall miss its real significance, because it is actually part of a much bigger story, one which tells of God's dealings with humanity.

The story of Joseph, which appears in the first book of the Bible, marks a new departure in the unfolding drama



of God's creation plan. The book of Genesis (meaning 'beginnings' or 'origins') opens with God's creation of a perfect world where people live in perfect harmony with Him.<sup>1</sup> Once people choose to go their own way instead of obeying God, things start to go wrong.<sup>2</sup> By the time of Joseph, God has started on His plan of redemption, choosing to create a people who would have a special relationship with Himself. It started with just one man, Abraham,<sup>3</sup> and progress was slow, because Abraham only had one son, Isaac, by his wife, and Isaac just had twins, Esau and Jacob.<sup>4</sup> God chose to develop his special family through Jacob's sons, and that's when the tribes of Israel (the new name which God gave to Jacob) were founded, because amazingly Jacob fathered twelve sons, one of whom was Joseph.

### *Family favourites*

At one level the story of Joseph is the story of a dysfunctional family. That is not why the story is in the Bible, but the fact that it was that kind of family and that it has been recorded in Scripture, helps us to see not only the extent to which sin can spoil the closest of human relationships, but also how God can use even such dysfunctionality to further His purposes. Joseph was born into a complex family situation. There was one father, Jacob, but four mothers (two wives and two concubines), eleven sons and one daughter. When Joseph was still quite young, his mother Rachel had another son, Benjamin, but she died in childbirth. This is the background to the favouritism that Jacob showed to Joseph:

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1 and 2

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 3 - 6 verse 7

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 12-22

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 25:19-26

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*Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he was the son of his old age.*<sup>5</sup>

He was also the firstborn of Rachel, the love of Jacob's life for whom he had had to work and wait seven years after being tricked into marrying her elder sister Leah. Rachel had fertility problems, whilst her sister produced with ease. By the time Rachel had Joseph, both women had vied for their husband's favour by getting their maids to act as surrogate mothers. The ensuing rivalries and tensions between the women and their children is not hard to understand. It must have been something of a nightmare for Jacob too!<sup>6</sup>

You might have thought that Jacob would have learned from his own past. His father Isaac had favoured his brother Esau, and Rebekah, his mother, had preferred Jacob, resulting in a rivalry which ended in Jacob having to leave home under a cloud.<sup>7</sup> Yet now he loved some of his own children more than the others. Perhaps it was understandable that he should favour the children of his old age and his dearest wife, but there was no excuse for him to show it, and certainly not to accentuate it by marking out Joseph as he did when he gave Joseph his famous coat. Some people never learn!

There are people fortunate in having happy childhood memories of family life.

When I was young we loved to have company round to visit, especially family. Often, as the last person left, my mother would close the door, let out a feigned sigh, and

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<sup>5</sup> Genesis 37:3

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 29 and 30

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 27 and 28

with a playful smile quote a line of an old hymn: ‘Peace perfect peace, with loved ones far away!’ She was only kidding of course, and my brother John and I knew that mum really loved having visitors, but we also knew she liked to have her house back to herself again. I smile as I think of her; she was great fun.

Other people don’t have such happy memories of childhood, and the further they can get away from their ‘loved ones’ the better. As I write this, I have just been on the phone with an old friend whose childhood was miserable, whose father was always abusing his mother, and who was himself the object of abuse. To this day there is a legacy of bitterness and an inability to express affection, which is having a negative impact on the next generation. There is perhaps nothing more destructive to an individual than to be in a dysfunctional family. If your family life sometimes seems to be getting out of control or going terribly wrong, and you are finding that hard to bear, then this is a story with which you will empathise.

Clearly, Jacob’s family was far from perfect, so we learn right at the beginning of the story that God can use imperfect people. In fact, the only material he ever has to work with is fallen, sinful and often deeply flawed, which means that He can work with someone just like you and me! So if your past is one you would rather forget, then let the story of Joseph give you hope that God can take the broken threads of your life and weave them into a beautiful tapestry that will give joy to others.

### *The big picture*

Joseph’s story, which begins in Genesis chapter 37, marks a new phase in God’s plan. In the bigger picture of Scripture,

God is setting things up for a greater story, the redemption of His chosen people from Egypt. Before His people can be rescued from Egypt, however, they have first to get there, and this is where Joseph comes into the story.

Before looking at Joseph's life in detail, two principles of biblical interpretation need to be borne in mind. The first is that when reading these Old Testament stories, the biblical text must guide us in our interpretation. The bible is its own best interpreter. In fact this is how we should interpret all Scripture; it is clear and capable of interpreting itself. So we must be careful not to speculate beyond what is written.

The second principle is that we must not read the Old Testament (as many scholars do) as if the New Testament had not been written. We read it today as Christians, that is, as those who have the final revelation from God written in our New Testament. The Old Testament is still a Christian book, however; it is simply full of Christ. As someone has said, 'every story whispers his name' - and I would want to add that some Old Testament stories shout it out loud! So, after His resurrection, Jesus met His disciples and 'beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself'.<sup>8</sup> Those 'Scriptures' were, of course, what we know today as the Old Testament.

Genesis 37:2 begins by saying, 'These are the generations of Jacob' The Hebrew word is '*toledoth*', which means 'generations'. Throughout Genesis it is used as a technical heading for each new section of the story. So, for example, in Genesis 2 it reads, 'These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.' Later we

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<sup>8</sup> Luke 24:27

read about the ‘generations of Adam ... of Noah ... of the sons of Noah ... of Shem ... of Terah (the father of Abraham) ... of Isaac ... of Esau ...’ and now, ‘of Jacob.’ Up to this point in the book there were those who ‘called on the name of the LORD.’<sup>9</sup> Among them was Abraham, the father of those who have faith. Now those who call upon God’s name – the church of that age – are going to be called ‘Israel’, which was the new name given to Jacob by God Himself.<sup>10</sup> In fact even in the New Testament people who call upon the name of the Lord Jesus are called ‘the Israel of God’ by the apostle Paul.<sup>11</sup> This is the last time this heading (the generations of ...) is used in the whole Old Testament Scriptures, because the rest of the Old Testament is about the nation of Israel, the descendants of this individual. Joseph is used to set things up so that Israel might grow into a great nation in the safety of Egypt and later be redeemed by the mighty hand of God.<sup>12</sup>

The next time in the Bible that this expression (*‘toledoth’*) is used, it marks a new departure again. We find it used in Matthew chapter 1: ‘The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.’ If Matthew had written in Hebrew, he would have used the same word as is used in Genesis (*‘toledoth’*). What is Matthew telling us? He is saying that with the coming of Jesus into the world a new thing happened, something that continues the story, that picks up and fulfils promises made all the way back in Genesis. It is also worth noting that ‘the generations of Jacob’ begin and end with a Joseph. Joseph is the first

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<sup>9</sup> Genesis 4:26

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 32:22-30

<sup>11</sup> Galatians 6:16

<sup>12</sup> Exodus chapters 1-14

name introduced after the ‘generations of Jacob’ appear in Genesis, and Joseph is the last name used in the genealogy of Jesus as detailed in Matthew.<sup>13</sup> Joseph, the legal father of Jesus, would be the last Joseph mentioned before the new *toledoth* of Jesus came in.

### *When God is invisible*

That is the bigger picture of where the story of this seventeen-year-old boy Joseph is going. But none of that was known to him at this stage. In fact if you read the first chapter of his life, you will find that God’s name doesn’t appear at all.<sup>14</sup> Moses, who wrote this account, wanted his readers to ask the question, ‘Why isn’t God mentioned?’ This is one of the author’s teaching techniques. The absence of God’s name is deliberate in order to provoke the question and make the reader or hearer think. Although God’s name is not mentioned and His presence is not seen, he is nonetheless active in everything that takes place. The reality is that in your life and mine there are many days, and hours within days, when God’s presence is not felt, when He seems miles away and when no reference either in thought or word is made to Him. To anyone looking on at the circumstances Joseph goes through, God does not appear to be involved. That’s why secular writers can write about his life and miss the point of what is going on. That is also why our non-Christian friends can look at us and see no obvious sign that God is alive and at hand for us. Like them, we struggle to get up in the morning, we take colds and cancers, and we grow old and die. Circumstances over which we have no control often seem to determine the course of our lives; we make

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<sup>13</sup> Genesis 37:2; Matthew 1:16

<sup>14</sup> Genesis 37



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good and bad decisions, and God seems a million miles away. Very often the most ‘spiritual’ among us forget to consult Him and push on with our own agenda. That is what we find people doing in this story; that’s the way the story is told because that’s the way we are as human beings. Made by God, we ignore Him; provided for by Him, we forget to give thanks; loved by God, we don’t return the compliment.

### *‘Any dream will do’*



Things were already in a pretty dreadful state in Jacob’s family when our story begins. Joseph was seventeen and his brothers were grown men, but they were already annoyed by their father’s obvious preference for Rachel’s children. The ‘coat of many colours’ didn’t help, of course. Its significance was that it indicated status as well as favour. It marked Joseph out as the management rather than the worker. It may even have implied to the brothers that their father might favour Joseph over them when it came to the question of inheritance. If there was anything guaranteed to make Joseph stand out as being a daddy’s boy, that coat would do it.



*Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other 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.<sup>15</sup>*

His brothers hated him for it. But there was more to their hatred than that.

The story begins by telling us that Joseph brought a ‘bad report’ of the boys to his father after doing a spot of

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<sup>15</sup> Genesis 37:3-4

shepherding duty with his brothers. Was he asked to keep an eye on them? Did he spice up the report and make it sound worse than it was? Was he simply acting as a talebearer, a tattle-tale or a snitch? There is nothing in the text to suggest he may have been like this. Certainly his future behaviour gives no hint of his having a character flaw like that. One thing we do know from the previous chapters of Genesis is that it would not take much imagination to come up with something bad to say about them. Already these brothers had been up to some significant mischief. Reuben had slept with his father's concubine,<sup>16</sup> while Simeon and Levi had slaughtered virtually a whole tribe at Schechem because some of the men had disgraced their sister.<sup>17</sup> These men were constitutionally rough, reckless and dangerous. Very probably their father could not trust them to do what they were supposed to be doing for him. Yet it appears that he could trust Joseph, and later in this chapter we find him sending Joseph out to check that his sons were looking after the sheep properly.<sup>18</sup>

The really significant point of the early part of Joseph's story, however, has to do with his dreams. As was established earlier, God does not appear in this first chapter yet He is everywhere present. It is also true that He does not speak yet His voice is truly heard. That is because He had a witness:

*Now Joseph had a dream... Then he dreamed another dream.*<sup>19</sup>

God was communicating His word through Joseph's dreams.

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<sup>16</sup> Genesis 35:22

<sup>17</sup> Genesis 34

<sup>18</sup> Genesis 37:12-14

<sup>19</sup> Genesis 37:5, 9

There are several different ways in Genesis in which God deals with His people. In chapters 1-11 He appears to people as a theophany, an appearance of God in the form of an angel or other mysterious figure. In chapters 12-35 He speaks to people in dreams and visions. Now, in chapters 36-50, He makes His will known without speaking directly to individuals. There is no prophetic word as such, yet He makes His purposes known second-hand, through a verbal witness. Joseph did not have the experiences his fathers had. He heard no voice speak to him; unlike Abraham, he had no mysterious visitors whose very presence left Abraham with a sense that God had visited him.<sup>20</sup> There was no great vision of a ladder stretching from earth to heaven,<sup>21</sup> nor a physical struggle with a heavenly being that lasted all night, such as his father Jacob had.<sup>22</sup> Joseph had to go through his life trusting God when God was both unseen and apparently silent. Even these dreams in chapter 37 contain no revelation of God or divine explanation to confirm their origin or their meaning. That they are of God is confirmed only with hindsight as they are fulfilled in the flow of history.

On the surface, Joseph's dreams are entirely secular and may even seem self-serving, but they are in fact, as we shall see, God's witness and sure word to the family. God never leaves Himself without a witness. He speaks to the world in every generation. The New Testament speaks about this witness:

*In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways.*<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Genesis 18

<sup>21</sup> Genesis 28:10-19

<sup>22</sup> Genesis 32:22ff

<sup>23</sup> Hebrews 1:1

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In the culture of Joseph's time, dreams such as these were often thought to be a means of divine communication and prediction. Dreams were a demonstration of God's sovereignty, a declaration of the fact that He rules the world and the affairs of individuals. These dreams right at the beginning of the story are going to be fulfilled. They correctly outline the future as it is going to unfold, and they are a standing reminder that we all live our lives under the authority of the Word of God whether we are aware of it or not. One interesting fact to observe is that the dreams come in pairs to suggest certainty of fulfilment. It is this which probably drove Joseph to tell the family what he'd dreamt. Later on in Israel's history any message or word had to be established in the mouth of two witnesses. The two dreams act as two witnesses to Joseph's family of God's ultimate intention.

His first dream about the corn probably hints at the coming famine and the work that Joseph would do in Egypt. He was going to be responsible for providing corn for the whole Egyptian Empire and beyond. Certainly his brothers recognised right away what the dream suggested, because they said to him, 'Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?'<sup>24</sup>

The second dream has the sun, moon and eleven stars bowing down before him. It goes further than the first, and the message of not only his brothers but also his father and mother bowing down to him comes through clearly.

Why did Joseph tell them? Was he being brash, arrogant, or just foolish? All kinds of suggestions have been offered to explain his behaviour. Maybe it was simply that he felt bemused and quite excited at having two such dreams in

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<sup>24</sup> Genesis 37:8

succession and felt the need to tell those who knew him best. I remember when I first went to Theological College in Ireland. On the first weekend there I was sent to preach in a country church. It was my first experience of preaching in Ireland. I was excited and rather nervous, but it went well and I was thrilled with the response of people. Next day, at lunch, I got into conversation with another first-year student. Perhaps I wanted to impress her; it may be I was feeling pleased with myself. I do know that I was quite 'high' after a good Sunday and that I needed to talk about it, but this girl went away thinking I was 'full of myself' and rather conceited. She wasn't impressed. I know how she felt, for she told me afterwards. We eventually married, and she has yet to give me her definitive view on what was going on that day! The point is that we don't know why Joseph told everyone about his dream, and the Bible gives us no reason to think ill of him, but we can be glad he did, because it meant that all of his family knew at the same time the story of these dreams which were to be fulfilled exactly as revealed. First his brothers bow down to him in Egypt<sup>25</sup>; then they bow again twice to honour him,<sup>26</sup> and then finally they throw themselves down at his feet fearing for their lives.<sup>27</sup> This perfect fulfilment of Joseph's dreams demonstrated to them many years later that they had heard the Word of God from their brother. There is a sense in which he had to tell because he was the voice of God to his family in that generation. He was unconscious of it and they were annoyed by it, indeed 'they hated him all the more',<sup>28</sup> but it was part of God's plan.

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<sup>25</sup> Genesis 42:6

<sup>26</sup> Genesis 43:26, 28

<sup>27</sup> Genesis 50:18

<sup>28</sup> Genesis 37:8

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This means that when they mocked Joseph, they were mocking the Word of God, and when they rejected Joseph, they were rejecting that same Word. The Bible says of Joseph that ‘until what he said had come to pass, the word of the Lord tested him.’<sup>29</sup> When our Lord Jesus was on earth, He too was accused by His opponents of being brash, and even of blaspheming against God by the claims He was making. They despised Him and mocked him as a Nazarene and an uneducated man. They challenged the authority by which He spoke.

Today we are witnesses of a similar kind to Joseph. This is not a day of significant signs and wonders, though many wish it were. This is not the day of the Old Testament prophet nor of the New Testament apostle. There are no fresh words from God through specially appointed vessels. God is at work differently today, for He has given us a word for the world. No doubt it sounds brash on our lips. It proclaims our place in God’s purposes; that we are ‘children of God’ and ‘heirs of life.’<sup>30</sup> We are able to say from Scripture (the sure Word of God) that we have eternal life. And the world takes exception to what we say just as the brothers took exception to what Joseph said. After all, doesn’t the Bible teach that believers will judge angels?<sup>31</sup> Isn’t it arrogant to make such claims? Isn’t it the height of nonsense to be so sure of our soul’s salvation? Well, sometimes the way we express ourselves does make us sound arrogant. Perhaps there was a hint of pride in Joseph, though the text gives us no grounds for thinking that. But when we speak what God has said in His Word, we are simply telling the truth.

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<sup>29</sup> Psalm 105:19

<sup>30</sup> Romans 8:16-17

<sup>31</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:3



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It was this truth-telling that roused the hatred of his brothers, just as Jesus' declaration of truth roused the hatred of the authorities of His day. The brothers' rejection of Joseph is explained in terms of their rejection of the revelation given through him:

*So they hated him all the more because of his dreams and for his words.*<sup>32</sup>

You can see the emphasis on the 'words'. That is the Bible's own interpretation of their hostility. When they mocked Joseph's dreams, they were mocking the revelation of God.

Only one man wondered about what he had heard. 'His father kept the saying in mind.'<sup>33</sup> Even though he rebuked his son for being so brash, Jacob saw the truth in it: he recognised that God had spoken. He may not have seen how it could all be worked out, but he took it seriously. And God left Himself a witness. He had Joseph tell these dreams up front and share them with his family so that they would all remember, so that they would all be witnesses to the fact that before the events took place God had sent His witness. The experiences of their lives were not going to be the product of chance or the result of human decision, but were being guided and superintended by a God who works out everything in accordance with His purposes.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Genesis 37:8

<sup>33</sup> Genesis 37:11

<sup>34</sup> Romans 8:28