



LITERARY ANALYSIS OF GENESIS 37:2b-11

“Beloved Son, Hated Brother”

Genesis 37 introduces the Joseph Narrative by laying the foundation for the crisis between Joseph and his brothers. It also foreshadows through Joseph’s dreams the final resolution to the crisis.

The report of Joseph’s dreams forms God’s call of Joseph, His sovereign choice of an individual to “keep a great many people alive” (Gen. 50:20). The immediate effect of God’s choice was hatred by his brothers. The chapter traces the growing estrangement between Joseph and his brothers that was precipitated by Israel’s love and the LORD’s choice of Joseph.

The promise of God has been long time coming. God is never late, but then again from our perspective, He is seldom early. A posterity without number had been promised to Abraham (Gen. 12:2; 15:5; 22:17), and that it was to be through Isaac (Gen. 18:12; cf. 24:60). The promise was affirmed to Isaac that he should become a multitude of people (Gen. 26:4). Finally, the promise was affirmed to Jacob (Gen. 28:14; 35:11) that he likewise would become an innumerable people.

In the case of Abraham and Isaac, the evidence of fulfillment to them in their children was lacking. Abraham had only Isaac, and Isaac had only Esau and Jacob. However, in the case of Jacob, the number of sons indicates God’s promise was in the process of fulfillment. In respect to the delay of a son to Abraham, it was God’s purpose to show that heirs to the covenant are provided by divine power alone. In regard to Isaac, where more than one possibility exists, the heir to the covenant is selected by God alone, not men. Now, God selects and calls whom He wills to administer His blessing upon His people, in spite of the opposition of others.

An important principle in the Joseph Narrative (Genesis 37—50) is how Joseph’s dreams come true despite affliction and humiliation brought about by others. Joseph blazes a trail through mistreatment, false accusations, undeserved punishment, and gross misunderstanding. He exemplifies forgiveness, freedom from bitterness, and an unbelievably positive attitude toward those who had done him harm.

Literary Unity of Genesis 37:2b-11

Introduction: Joseph's background within the family in Canaan (37:2b-e)

- A Israel's preferential love for Joseph (37:3)
- B Brothers' hatred of Joseph (37:4a)
- C Brothers' silence toward Joseph (37:4b)
- D Brothers' reaction to Joseph's first dream (37:5)
- E Joseph's first dream (37:6-7)
- X BROTHERS' EMBITTERED HATRED OF JOSEPH (37:8)**
- E' Joseph's second dream (37:9-10a)
- D' Jacob's reaction to Joseph's second dream (37:10b)
- C' Jacob's speech to Joseph (37:10c)
- B' Brothers' envy of Joseph (37:11a)
- A' Jacob ponders the matter (37:11b)

The opening paragraph (Gen. 37:3-11) of the Joseph Narrative exhibits an orderly literary arrangement (A, B, C, D, E). The pivot point and climax to the paragraph comes in X, wherein both the narrator's voice and reported speech of Joseph brothers' exhibit embittered hatred toward him. This is because of his dreams and words, which Joseph had spoken to them. After the climax, events are repeated in an inverted order (E', D', C', B', A').

- A Israel's preferential love for Joseph (37:3)**
→ **A' Jacob ponders the matter (37:11b)**

After a brief introduction to Joseph's immediate background within his family in Canaan (Gen. 37:2b-e), our narrator launches into the Joseph Narrative proper. Contrary to what one may expect, no genealogical information immediately follows the clause "These are [the records of] the generations of Jacob" (v. 2a). Strikingly, the only name, which appears, is Joseph, although at this time he had ten brothers. This limitation speaks eloquently of the dismal record of failure, which characterized the older sons of Jacob.

Verse 3a begins with a circumstantial clause, "Now Israel loved Joseph" (A), and another circumstantial clause concludes the episode in verse 11b, "but his father pondered the matter". These circumstantial clauses form the "bookends" to the episode, and thus mark of the episodic boundaries.

[A Hebrew circumstantial clause breaks the ordinary narrative prose chain of *waw*-consecutive + prefixed verb (or, more rarely, + suffixed verb). Commonly this is accomplished by inserting the subject, which generally follows the predicate in Hebrew prose, between the *waw*-consecutive and

the verb. Circumstantial clauses that begin and end an episode often signal episodic boundaries. This point is worth making because “circumstantial clauses at episode boundaries mark major transitions in (narrative) discourse, whereas circumstantial clauses which are integral to a sentence are quite unobtrusive and often a mere aside” (Anderson, *The Hebrew Sentence*, 1974:79). However, a circumstantial clause is not the only indication of episodic boundaries or subject change. This is because, a new subject, or at least the resumption of a subject which has been already introduced, can follow a *waw*-consecutive verb (according to the ordinary Hebrew narrative sentence structure of *waw*-consecutive verb + subject (e.g., Gen. 4:25; 11:1; 12:1, 4).]

As we would expect in circumstantial clauses, the Hebrew word order is normal and parallels each other in verses 3a and 11b, subject, verb, and object. Moreover, each circumstantial clause balance each other in word count, each having four words each (counting the definite object marker).

verse 3a: Pswy-t) bh) l) r#yw ***Now-Israel loved Joseph***
verse 11b: rbdh-t) rm# wyb)w ***But-his-father pondered the-matter***

The translation of verse 11b differs from that of the NASB because “in mind” does not occur in the Hebrew text and is not needed to carry the sense of the context. The Hebrew verb “to ponder” comes from the Akkadian verb meaning “to wait upon, attend, watch, retain” (KB, 993). The Hebrew verbs “love” in verse 3a and “ponder” in verse 11b, accentuates Israel/Jacob’s attention rests upon Joseph. Thus, Joseph permeates his father’s life in the he is both in his heart (“love”) and inner thoughts (“ponder”).

It is significant to note that the names of father and son, i.e., “Jacob” and “Joseph”, are juxtaposed (placed side by side in the text). Our narrator incorporates an unusual, if not blunt, juxtaposition of proper names: “These are [the records of] the generations of **Jacob Joseph** . . . “. This juxtapositioning of proper names speaks of the intimacy and closeness, which Jacob enjoyed with Joseph, first visually and literarily seen, and then the explanation for their intimacy is explained in verse 3.

Moreover, are we to understand that since Joseph is the only one mentioned that he is the sum and consummation of Jacob’s generations? Indeed! Not only is Joseph the focus of his father’s love, but also he becomes the center focus of the dreams (vv. 5-9).

The literary function of the circumstantial clause in verse 3a reintroduces Jacob into the main narrative line after Joseph's preeminent staging in verse 2b-e. This gives further background material concerning Jacob's relationship with his beloved-son that spawns Joseph brothers' hatred in the subsequent narrative (cf. Gen. 37:8, 12-36). Verse 11b capsules the foregoing events thus far. Both circumstantial clauses relate Jacob's point of view in third person.

B Brothers' hatred of Joseph (37:4a)

→ **B' Brothers' envy of Joseph (37:11a)**

Because of Israel's outward manifested love for him, Joseph's brothers respond with hatred. Interestingly, this hatred was not directed toward their father, the source of the preferential treatment, but toward Joseph. The Hebrew term for hate () n#) in verse 4a is balanced in verse 11a with their "envy" () nq) of Joseph. One cannot help to be struck by the similarity of the Hebrew consonants of these two verbs. Although not etymologically related to each other, they do share two stem consonants, and bot convey the idea of intense emotional strife.

An additional similarity between the panels B/B' is their syntax. In each case, Joseph is the understood direct object of the brothers' internal emotion. The direct object is emphasized by its proleptic placement [the subject postponed after its object], literally, "that **him** loved their-father", in verse 4a, and "they-envied **him** his-brothers" in verse 11a.

C Brothers' silence toward Joseph (37:4b)

→ **C' Jacob's speech to Joseph (37:10c)**

These two parallel panels are in antithesis with one another. The results of Israel's preferential love for Joseph only precipitates hatred among his sons/brothers, "so they hated him and could not speak to him in peace", whereas Joseph's second dream elicits Jacob's strong rebuke.

D Brothers' reaction to Joseph's first dream (37:5)

→ **D' Jacob's reaction to Joseph's second dream (37:10b)**

It is remarkable that most commentators do not mention Joseph brothers' reaction to his report of his first dream precedes the report of the dream! In addition, those that do comment ascribe it as a "general introduction to the first dream" (Coats, *Genesis*, 1974:13) or as a textual gloss (Speiser, *Genesis*, 1964:290, cf. BHS). The anomaly, that both speaker and addressee are specified before the dream report begins and the brothers' resultant behavior, is an essential structural element in the chiasmic development of this episode.

If we only perceive the purpose of verse 5 as “a sort of preview of what will happen” (Longacre, *Joseph*, 1989:188), then we will overlook our narrator’s desire to highlight the rising crescendo of the brothers’ hatred toward Joseph (which culminates in verse 8, X). Our author fronts the brothers’ reaction to underscore their hatred, which is an example of the literary device *prolepsis*. Most importantly, the prolepsis balances symmetrically with Jacob’s reaction to Joseph’s second dream (v. 10b, D’).

Realizing that verse 5b (D) balances verse 10b (D’), helps to establish the internal integrity of the Masoretic text. Although the Septuagint omits verse 5b, “they hated him even more”, the chiasmic structure clearly indicates verse 5b is essential for balance. This is an instance where textual questions may be evaluated via internal chiasmic structure.

E Joseph’s first dream (37:6-7)

→ **E’ Joseph’s second dream (37:9-10a)**

The dream reports occupy the bulk of the first episode (forty-nine words), which its length itself indicates importance. Several common elements unite these two reports and form a distance parallel construction. This symmetry, so characteristic of the Joseph Narrative, exudes clearly to the surface.

As far as word count in the Hebrew text, the dream reports nicely balance each other. The first dream report in verses 6-7 contains twenty-four words, and the second in verses 9-10, twenty-five words.

Before Joseph actually tells his brothers his first dream, he first requests politely for their attention: “Please listen”. The substance of the first dream is then recounted by Joseph in verse 7. Verse 9b details his description of his second dream, being couched in a similar verbal pattern. However, the request for their attention is not as obvious as in verse 6. It has no imperative “to hear”. However, the parallel construction with verse 6 makes it clear that this briefer formula serves the same function.

Furthermore, there are linking words, which are common to both panels. For example, both reports include the recurrent “behold”. This interjection often marks dreams and excited speech in Hebrew. Verse 9a introduces the second dream with, “Now he had still another **dream**”. This is picking up the essential term from verses 6-7: “And he said to them, ‘Please listen to this **dream** which I have had’” (literally, “which I have dreamed”).

Both dreams are first addressed to the brothers (vv. 5b, 9b), albeit in verse 10a, our narrator tells us also that Joseph “related it to his father”, after which he reemphasizes that he also related it “to his brothers”. Both dreams end with the image of his brothers “bowing down” to him.

X BROTHERS’ EMBITTERED HATRED OF JOSEPH (37:8)

Verse 8 marks the artistic climax of the episode. The report of Joseph’s dreams (E//E’) brackets the brothers’ vocal reaction (X). They immediately interpret his **dreams** as ruling over them. Twice a cognate Qal infinitive absolute is used in conjunction with a finite verb in order to convey the brothers’ outrage of the content of the dreams Joseph recites: “Are you actually going to reign over us?” “Are you really going to rule over us?” The structure suggests that this is almost a threatening question on the brothers’ part. These two verbs, in closely-knit Hebrew parallelism, mark the decided climax of the episode.

Moreover, several anomalous features distinguish verse 8 as the center of the chiasmic structure. Not only does Joseph’s dreams bracket his brothers’ singular vocal outrage, but most notably, this is the first and only recorded speech between the brothers and Joseph until Genesis 42. In addition, the word “dreams” is arresting since the linear narrative has reported only Joseph’s report of his first dream (vv. 5-7). The ever increasing intensity of Joseph brothers’ hostility in verse 8 is underscored by the final occurrence of the three-fold repetition of the phrase “and they hated him” (cf. vv. 4, 5; note the exact correspondence of wt)) n# dw(wpswyw in vv. 5 and 8).

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