

## Was Joseph Innocent?

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To help ourselves understand the context and meaning of the Joseph narratives found in Genesis 37-50, it is helpful to understand a few important facts concerning Joseph, from the previous narratives:

1. After working for Laban seven years, Jacob marries Leah and agrees to work seven more years to marry Rachel [Gen 29:18-30].
2. Joseph is the 11<sup>th</sup> son of Jacob, born to Rachel [Gen 30:23-25].
3. After Joseph is born, Jacob strikes a deal with his father-in-law Laban to continue working for him in payment of sheep and goats [Gen 30:25-36].
4. After completing his service, Jacob explains that he has worked for Laban 20 years: 14 years for his two wives and 6 years for the flocks [Gen 31:41].
5. Consequently, we can conclude that the 11 sons of Jacob (plus Dinah) were all born in a 7 year period, from the time Jacob married Leah and Rachel, to Joseph's birth time stamped with Jacob's subsequent deal with Laban.
6. Dinah is born in Genesis 30:21, implying that Joseph and Dinah are approximately the same age.
7. Given the rapid births of the 11 brothers plus Dinah over a 7 year period, there isn't much of an age difference between all of them.

### Shechem

When Shechem takes Dinah in Gen 34, we should assume that she is of some marriageable age. Joseph may or may not be of a marriageable age, but the structure of Gen 34 clearly implies that he is involved in the conspiracy to murder the Shechemites:

1. Gen 34:13 – “*The sons of Jacob* answered Shechem and his father Hamor deceitfully, because he had defiled their sister Dinah.”
2. Gen 34:27-29 – “*The sons of Jacob* came upon the slain and plundered the city, because they had defiled their sister. They took their flocks and their herds, their donkeys, and whatever was in the city and in the field. All their wealth, all their little ones and their wives, all that was in the houses, they captured and plundered.”

Consequently, from the text, we should assume that Joseph was not only part of the conspiracy [Gen 34:13] but also the crime, the plundering, or rape, of Shechem [Gen 34:27-29]. Although true that Joseph was a youth, likely 17 years old or younger [Gen 37:2] and the sons of Leah were the eldest of Jacob's sons and the wielders of the knives, the text is clear that all of Jacob's sons, including Joseph were culpable [Gen 34:13, 27].

## **A Bad Report**

When Joseph is seventeen, he brings a bad report of his brothers to his father [Gen 37:2]. In and of itself, there is nothing wrong with bringing a bad report or reporting some sort of wrongdoing. For example, if we witness a crime, we ought to report it. However, when dealing with participants in the Holy Community, the process should work somewhat differently... Matthew 18 comes to mind.

**Mat 18:15-17** <sup>15</sup>¶ "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. <sup>16</sup> But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. <sup>17</sup> If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Ideally, if the Sons of Jacob were a Holy Community [which they do not seem to be prior to their migration to Egypt], Joseph should have tried to confront his brothers and bring them to repentance rather than simply report them to his father. Although Joseph was 17 years old at the time, his eldest brother Reuben would have been 24 years old (at most). Joseph's decision to go directly to Jacob speaks volumes in terms of the relationship between Joseph and his brothers, as well as Jacob and his sons. In short, I think we can surmise the following:

1. Joseph's 10 older brothers are "outsiders" to the Holy Community, but most likely, Joseph and all the Sons of Jacob are all outsiders, given the immediately preceding Shechem narrative.
2. Jacob clearly is playing favorites and has intended to give Joseph the primary inheritance, deserved by the first born.

Understanding these two issues puts Joseph's dreams into some better context.

## **Joseph's Dreams**

In Gen 37, Joseph has two dreams:

Dream #1 – "Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf." [Gen 37:7]

Joseph's brothers understand Joseph's dream to suggest that he will one day rule over them. Consequently, "they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words" [Gen 37:8]. Most readers understand that this dream reaches some sort of fulfillment when Joseph's brothers prostrate themselves to him in Gen 42:6 and 9. Joseph then has another dream:

Dream #2 – "Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." [Gen 37:9]

Joseph reports this dream at least twice, once to his brothers [v9] and once to his father and brothers [v10]. Significantly, Jacob rebukes Joseph and ridicules his dream saying “What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?” [Gen 37:10]. Since Rachel died earlier in Gen 35:19, the text seems to suggest that there is something problematic with Joseph’s second dream, or at least its interpretation.

The primary question now is this: Was Joseph’s dreams some sort of spiritual gift? I would not automatically make that conclusion based on 1 Cor 12-13, especially 1 Cor 13:2-4:

**1 Cor 13:2-4** <sup>2</sup> And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup> If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. <sup>4</sup> Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant...

What we see in Joseph’s boastful behavior is arrogance, which increases the tension amongst his brothers, until finally they decide to rid themselves of them. In no way do I condone the action of Joseph’s brothers, but I want to point out that Joseph is at least perverting his spiritual gift. Furthermore, Jacob’s prophesy concerning Judah is eye opening:

**Gen 49:8-12** <sup>8</sup> "Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons shall bow down before you. <sup>9</sup> Judah is a lion's cub; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He stooped down; he crouched as a lion and as a lioness; who dares rouse him? <sup>10</sup> The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples. <sup>11</sup> Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he has washed his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes. <sup>12</sup> His eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk.

Gen 49:8 certainly opens up the possibility that Joseph may have misrepresented his dreams, at least to some degree. From an eschatological standpoint, Joseph’s first dream was fulfilled. But, the second does not seem to be since according to Jacob’s interpretation, Rachel had already died.

It is also worth noting the reaction of other saints when given certain divine foreknowledge. For example, we read that Mary “treasured up these things in her heart” when the angel of the Lord told her about the son she would bear and name Jesus. You never see Mary or Jesus lording their favored status over Israel, nor anyone else for that matter.

Consequently, we should probably understand that at a minimum, Joseph’s presentation of his dreams to his brothers were fallen, and he possibly misrepresented the second dream.

## Is Joseph Brought to Repentance?

In his dreams, Joseph notably does not give God any credit, if indeed they are spiritual gifts. Furthermore, Joseph's dreams bring discord and chaos, not peace. After he is sold into slavery, Joseph does not have any more dreams of note. However, later in Genesis, it is clear that Joseph seems to acquire a spiritual gift which enables him *to interpret dreams*, as evidenced when he is in prison [Gen 40] and when he interprets Pharaoh's dream [Gen 41].

In both these interpretation narratives, Joseph gives credit to God [Gen 40:8 and Gen 41:16]. However, what is intriguing is that Joseph seems to bargain with the Cupbearer:

**Gen 40:14-15** <sup>4</sup> Only remember me, when it is well with you, and please do me the kindness to mention me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this house. <sup>15</sup> For I was indeed stolen out of the land of the Hebrews, and here also I have done nothing that they should put me into the pit."

Additionally, there isn't a moral center in terms of the Cupbearer and the Baker at that time. Why were the Cupbearer and Baker in prison? Later, the Cupbearer acknowledges his offense [Gen 41:9], but it doesn't seem like Joseph is using his gift to bring sinners to repentance, but rather to improve his personal circumstances. In other words, it doesn't appear that Joseph is using his spiritual gift in a loving way.

Later in Gen 41, there is no such bargaining with Pharaoh, but rather the interpretation following by an honest and wise recommendation. At this point, it seems that Joseph has spiritually matured. From the text, it does not appear that there are any ulterior motives to his actions and that he is now using his spiritual gift with a sincere heart, with great concern for welfare of Egypt and its people. In other words, we can observe Joseph growing more and more repentant as God disciplines him for his arrogant and boastful heart found in the earlier narratives.

So, it would be a mistake to understand Joseph as an innocent lamb, but rather we should see that Joseph is an arrogant and boastful sinner, like us, who God brings to repentance.