

Joseph and the Sin of Pride

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Introduction

Too often our interpretation of a biblical text is skewed by tradition, by the authorities we listen to, by our own misunderstanding of a text, or because we did not apply ourselves to greater diligence of study. In most cases, such errors in interpretation are made quite innocently and do not necessarily create a problem with the overall message of a lesson or sermon.



Nevertheless, a teacher or preacher or anyone who proclaims the gospel – especially from a pulpit to a sanctuary filled with trusting listeners – must go the extra mile and give due diligence to getting the story right before proclaiming it as truth.

In 2014, I heard a pastor preach a series of messages based on Genesis 37. This pastor accused Joseph of being guilty of the sin of pride. And he is not alone in this interpretation of Joseph's character and motives.

A Jewish website called MyJewishLearning.com hosted an article by Rabbi Bradley Artson who wrote, "Joseph has the potential to fill his life with friendship, family and love. Yet his need to be preeminent, his need to belittle the gifts and experiences of this family in order to glorify his own talents, isolate him from his own kin. We get a clue about the extent of Joseph's pride from the very start."¹

David Guzik commented, "Joseph seems to be afflicted with the sort of pride often apparent among the favored and blessed. He is so focused on how great his dreams are for *him*, he doesn't begin to consider how the dreams will sound in the ears of *others*." (Italics are his.)²

Even R. C. Sproul, for whom I have the utmost respect, is included in those who accuse Joseph of the sin of pride. In a lesson from his website, Dr. Sproul said that Joseph "was somewhat arrogant and self-absorbed."³ In the same lesson, Dr. Sproul included the following statements concerning Joseph:

- "Joseph also seems to revel in his status as Jacob's most beloved child."

- “Joseph’s pride should be seen as sinful and foolish.”
- “Joseph’s haughtiness only worsened his precarious situation and shows us the danger of pride.”

In answer to a question concerning the life of Joseph, an unidentified online author replied, “As a 17-year-old shepherd, Joseph is something of a tattler, bringing a bad report about his brothers to their father (Genesis 37:2).”⁴

This unfortunate interpretation concerning the prideful nature of Joseph has been taught for so long and by such leading biblical authorities that most people seem to take it for granted that Joseph was, in fact, guilty of this most abhorrent of all sins (Prov. 16:5).

Yet a straight-forward reading of the text of Gen. 37:1-11 will yield no direct evidence that Joseph ever acted or responded toward any person or situation with an attitude of pride. In fact, these verses yield no direct evidence at all concerning any motives for Joseph’s actions, any misstep in his behavior, or any malicious aspect of his character.

Curious about such a straightforward and undocumented assessment of Joseph as was given on one website (www.gotquestions.org), I emailed the website and asked, “Other than surmise, conjecture, and guesswork, what direct biblical evidence (chapter and verse) can anyone put forward that Joseph was prideful before his brothers and his family?”

I soon received the following email reply from a person identified only as Kevin:

There is nothing in Scripture that points to Joseph's being proud or out of line in sharing his visions with his family. His brothers hated him, but that does not mean that Joseph was at fault. The notion that Joseph was prideful comes from interpreters'/teachers' assumptions. The Bible simply tells what Joseph said and did, which was to share God's revelation with others.

In the sermon mentioned at the beginning of this article, the pastor offered three items of evidence from the story of Joseph’s betrayal in Genesis 37 to support the idea that Joseph was guilty of pride.

1. In verse 2, Joseph gave a “bad report” to Jacob concerning the behavior of the brothers.
2. In verses 3 and 4, Jacob made for Joseph “an ornate robe” (NIV) which Joseph proudly wore to remind his brothers that “their father loved him more than any of them” (NIV).
3. In verses 5-11, Joseph shared his dreams with his brothers on at least two occasions, apparently for the purpose of lording his status over his brothers.

Let’s investigate the accusation of pride against Joseph using the three sermon points mentioned above, beginning with the subject of the **Bad Report** (Gen. 37:2). This will be followed by a look at the truth behind the **Beautiful Coat** that Joseph wore (Gen. 37:3-4), and a review of the **Baffling Dreams** of Joseph that caused such consternation in his family (Gen. 37:5-11).

Joseph Case 1: A Bad Report

The first proof some commentators have offered as evidence of Joseph's pride was the "bad report" he made concerning his brothers.

Gen. 37:2 Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them. (NIV)



For our study, we will begin with exploring why Moses referred to this report from Joseph to his father, Jacob, as evil or bad. There are several reasons that might have caused the report to be identified as bad or evil.

1. Joseph may have done a bad job of delivering the news.
2. Joseph may have had an evil motive in making the report, possibly to the point of lying in the report.
3. Joseph may have simply delivered news of happenings that were evil.

Content

The Bible tells us if this was an accurate report. In fact, the only thing the Bible tells us about this report is that it was bad or evil, which could mean many things as we have seen.

We will begin by looking closely at the words translated "evil report" in verse two.

The Hebrew word for evil used here is the most commonly used word for evil in the Old Testament. About 80% of the time, the word is translated as evil, bad, or some form of the word wicked. At other times, it is translated more specifically to refer to that which is disagreeable, malignant, hurtful, and unkind or even vicious.

The word for report is used only nine times in the Old Testament. Three of those times it is translated as "evil report," but four times it is translated as slander.

Based on these definitions, one might conclude that the report was bad because it contained evidence and/or examples of the vicious slander being spread around the country concerning the sons of Jacob. This is the interpretation offered by at least two 18th century commentators.

The first of these is Professor Peter Lange. According to Lange, the words used here for bad report refer to "a rumor whispered or creeping around." According to Lange, the reference to Joseph's giving a bad report concerning his brothers "does not mean that Joseph made accusations against

them, as the Vulgate has it, but that, in boyish simplicity, he repeated what he had heard about them.”⁵ Boyish simplicity seems very far removed from malicious and slanderous intent.

Continuing with this same theme, The Pulpit Commentary agrees that Joseph did not report what he himself personally witnessed, but simply repeated the scandalous things that were “circulating in the district respecting” the evil characters of the brothers.⁶ And the reports are not difficult to accept when we witness the attitude and actions the brothers take concerning the welfare of Joseph later in Chapter 2.

Revenge

Referring to the definitions of the two terms “bad report” given above, one might reasonably come to the conclusion that this was an evil report because Joseph gave a vicious and slanderous, and possibly even untrue report to Jacob concerning his brothers.

Maybe this report is labeled “evil” to indicate that Joseph spoke badly of his brothers to Jacob because he was not happy with them about the way they treated him. Was Joseph guilty of being a tattle-tale – of running to his father to tell on his brothers for spiteful reasons, thus incurring his brothers’ wrath towards him?

The problem is that such an interpretation of Joseph’s behavior contradicts everything else the Bible has to say about Joseph. There is nothing specific in verse 2 to indicate Joseph’s intent or motives in making the report.

Never once in all of one’s study of Joseph will one discover such an attitude about him or such a reaction to his circumstances. There is no evidence that Joseph ever resorted to lying to achieve selfish goals, or that he ever acted maliciously toward an enemy.

Once again, based on what the Bible actually says, there is no evidence that the bad reports were spawned by Joseph’s ill treatment. There is no direct evidence from Genesis 37 or from the context of this part of Genesis that Joseph had ever been treated badly by his brothers prior to the events of verses 12ff.

If his brothers treated him so badly on a regular basis, why would Joseph have gone, seemingly alone and undefended and with a willing heart, to find his brothers at Shechem? There is no evidence that he approached or entered their encampment with any reservation or sense of fear.

If there was no previous ill treatment, what motive would Joseph have had for giving a slanderous report about his brothers?

Such an understanding is most likely the projection of our knowledge of subsequent events that take place in the story and our own knowledge of human nature. In other words, one assumes that, since the brothers treated Joseph so badly later in the chapter, they must have been treating him badly all along. And we have an idea that, if we were abused as we assume Joseph was, we would not be gracious in our reporting.

One might dig a bit further into this situation and ask, “Did the brothers in fact know that Joseph had made this ‘bad report’ to Jacob?” There is nothing in verse 2 or in Genesis 37 to indicate that they did.

In verse 8, we read, “And they (the brothers) hated him (Joseph) all the more because of his dream and what he had said.” Those last few words, “what he had said,” could be construed to mean that, at the time Joseph revealed his dreams to his brothers, they were already angry with Joseph because of the bad reports he had delivered previously.

However, the context seems to indicate that this phrase refers more accurately to the incident of verses 5-7 where Joseph vocalized the content of his dream. This point will be dealt with in a later article.

Commenting on Genesis 37:2, Jamieson, Fausset, Brown Commentary provides the following concerning Joseph’s role as a shepherd and the content of the report:

Joseph . . . was feeding the flock – literally, "Joseph being seventeen years old was a shepherd over the flock" – he a lad, with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah. Oversight or superintendence is evidently implied. This post of chief shepherd in the party might be assigned him either from his being the son of a principal wife or from his own superior qualities of character; and if invested with this office, he acted not as a gossiping telltale, but as a "faithful steward" in reporting the scandalous conduct of his brethren. ⁷

These commentators are guessing that Joseph went to tend sheep in a supervisory role. They admit that such is “evidently implied.” Nevertheless, there is no direct evidence that such was the case. However, if all these things were true, and assuming that the report was accurate, then Joseph should be commended for his report as one who is reliable, and truthful.

The conclusion appears justified that Joseph is undeserving of a general condemnation by others just because the report he gave is defined as evil or bad.

Pride

More in line with the accusation of pride, one might ask, “Did Joseph give a bad report because he felt superior to his brothers and wished to demean them even further in his father’s eyes with a truthful yet slanderous report?”

The *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* apparently does not believe this to be true:

Neither are we obliged to suppose that Joseph was a gratuitous tale-bearer, or that when he carried their evil report to his father he was actuated by a prudish, censorious, or in any way unworthy spirit. That he very well knew how to hold his tongue no man ever gave more adequate proof; but he that understands that there is a time to keep silence necessarily sees also that there is a time to speak. ⁸

The Bible does not give us any direct evidence that Joseph ever felt superior to anyone, including his brothers.

Summary

Based on a literal reading of the text of Genesis 37 and based on what we know of the character of Joseph revealed in subsequent parts of the story of his life, the report he gave was bad or evil because its contents were of evil things. Joseph reported what he had witnessed, what he had heard from others, or possibly both.

In fact, a closer reading of verse two casts doubt on who or what the report might have contained. The nearest antecedent of the pronoun “them” in verse two is not all of the brothers, but four of his half-brothers – the sons of Bilhah (Dan and Naphtali) and Zilpah (Gad and Asher).

Thus we must conclude that, based on what “thus saith the Lord,” Joseph cannot be accused of acting with pride when he gave his evil report to Jacob. Instead, Joseph appears to have given an indication of the purity of his character that would be proven in subsequent events in his life.

Joseph apparently delivered the news as it was without any known motive other than possibly obedience to the wishes of his father, Jacob. Any other conclusion is without biblical support and conjecture.

Joseph Case 2: A Beautiful Coat

The second item of evidence offered as proof of Joseph’s pride was that he wore the splendid coat gifted to him by Jacob, his father. Much has been written about this coat of Joseph’s, with too many commentators, preachers, and Bible scholars giving Joseph a bad grade for wearing the coat.



One writer surmised that Jacob, who felt that Joseph was being unduly picked on by his older brother, gave the coat to Joseph to make Joseph feel better about himself. In other words, the gift of the coat was primarily an issue of self-esteem. In the article, the author wrote, “We can assume at the very least that Joseph wore it with pride and perhaps a bit of smugness at being singled out for this special gift.”⁹

One pastor said in a sermon concerning Joseph, “Whatever this garment looked like, it is clear that Joseph proudly wore it as a constant reminder to his older brothers that Joseph was the favored son.”¹⁰

Another writer said, “Joseph himself is portrayed as a young man somewhat lacking in common sense, or perhaps simply a bit self-absorbed.”¹¹

In each case, Joseph was either a troubled young man who did not know how to act civilly within the family, or he was simply filled with an overweening sense of pride and self-importance.

Let's look more closely into the matter of the coat.

The Coat

There is much debate and disagreement about the nature of the coat. The earliest English texts translate the Hebrew with "coat of many colors," but later translations say it differently. ¹²

KJV & NKJV: a coat of *many* colors (note that *many* is in italics, indicating that the word is not found in the oldest manuscripts but was added by translators to help clarify the text)

Amplified: a long tunic with sleeves

ESV & HCSB: a robe of many colors

NIV: a richly ornamented robe

RSV: a long robe with sleeves

NASB: a varicolored tunic (footnote: full-length robe)

Orthodox Jewish Bible: tunic reaching to palms and soles

New Century Version: a special robe with long sleeves

Dr. W. A. Criswell believed that the tunic was originally white "embroidered gorgeously around the skirt, and the sleeves, and the edges." He taught that the robe was long enough to reach the hands and feet of the wearer, and was typically worn by those who did not have to work because of their status in society. ¹³

According to Strong, the Hebrew word translated "coat" is *kuttoneth*, which referred to a tunic or undergarment, a long shirt-like garment usually made of linen. ¹⁴

Easton's Bible Dictionary describes the coat as "a garment long and full, such as was worn by the children of nobles...a long garment with sleeves... a coat of many pieces, i.e., a patchwork of many small pieces of divers colors." He adds that this garment was "worn like a shirt next to the skin."¹⁵

In Exodus and Leviticus, Moses used the same word to refer to the tunic worn by Aaron and the priests. When used in this context, the word is variously translated as "a specially woven tunic" (HCSB), as a "long *and* sleeved tunic of checkerwork" (Amplified, NASB), and as "a skillfully woven tunic" (NKJV).

Claude Mariottini, Professor of Old Testament, Northern Baptist Seminary, writes...

Since the *ketonet passim* (Hebrew for "coat of many colors") was the kind of garment that daughters of kings wore (See 2 Sam. 13:18), the garment probably was associated with people who were royalty, with officials who had high rank in the palace, or with people who had an exalted position in society. The fact that Jacob gave Joseph a *ketonet passim* means

that Jacob treated Joseph as a royal person, a person whom he considered to be above all his other sons. ¹⁶

In summary, the coat Jacob gave to Joseph appears to show that Jacob did indeed love Joseph more than his other sons, signifying his favoritism by a public display. We might assume that Joseph reacted with pride because of his father's favoritism, but to do so would only be an assumption, not biblical truth.

The Colors

Again referring to Strong, the Hebrew word translated "colors" is the word *pas*, which literally meant "flat (of the hand or foot), palm, sole" and was used figuratively to refer to a "tunic reaching to palms and soles." ¹⁷

No one seems to know how this word was translated as "color" in the earliest translations (including the Latin Vulgate and the Septuagint), but many believe it was simply a mistake in translation that was carried over into the earliest English versions.

The Text

Once again, let's look strictly at the text.

Genesis 37:3 *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 colors.*

The Bible specifically states that the coat was not Joseph's idea, but Jacob's. If the sons of Jacob were going to be angry with someone, why not begin with their own father? If anyone was prideful in this story, that person was Jacob, not Joseph.

Jacob loved Joseph more than his other sons. To make sure that no one could mistake his favoritism, Jacob created a distinguishing tunic for Joseph to wear. Whether or not it was multi-colored or long enough to reach his feet and hands is not relevant to the story.

What made the coat a symbol of hatred to Joseph's brothers was not its cut or color, nor the fact that Joseph wore it. What made them angry was the symbolism – the distinctive nature and purpose of the coat.

I remember when I was a lowly high school student. My dad worked hard and provided everything we needed and more. My mom was a terrific mother and home-maker. Both of them desired much more for their children than they could afford. But they gave us what they could and everything we needed, and they sacrificed to do it.

I was not a very popular person in high school, although I had a strong desire to be. I thought much of the cause of my unpopularity (which was truly a product of my own poor self-image) was due to my clothes. One of the most popular clothing items while I was in high school was a London Fog jacket. I craved and coveted a London Fog jacket – especially a navy blue one – that I could wear with the collar turned up like all the popular guys did.

My mom was aware of my desire, but could never have afforded to purchase one from a store. So she did the next best thing – she made me one. In color, it was light brown with a small hounds-tooth pattern. And the material was so limp that the collar would never stand up. I am ashamed to admit it now, but I was ashamed to wear it then.

Nevertheless, I did wear it – nearly every day. Why? Because my mom made it for me. I certainly did not think the coat was anything special, but my mom was very special to me, as my siblings and I were special to her. I wore the coat out of respect for Mom.

Throughout the story of Joseph’s life, one personality characteristic that is very obvious to even the casual observer (except those prejudiced by preconceptions and traditions) is that Joseph had a heart of gold. I believe he wore his “coat of many colors” because his father went to the trouble of making it for him and expected him to wear it. To have refused to wear it would have been as offensive to his father as wearing it was to his brothers. Given the choice, whom should Joseph choose to offend?

There is no evidence whatsoever that Joseph wore the coat for the sole purpose of intentionally aggravating his brothers by rubbing their noses in their inferiority. The brothers were angry with Joseph and refused to even speak to him, but it was Jacob’s pride and the sinful jealousy of the brothers that caused their anger, not Joseph’s prideful display of his “coat of many colors.”

Joseph Case 3: A Baffling Dream

A third point put forward to strengthen the argument concerning Joseph’s prideful character was his decision to share his dreams with his family. There seems to be a consensus among preachers that Joseph erred greatly in sharing his dreams with his family. In a sermon concerning Joseph and posted online, one pastor wrote:



There seems to be a problem for Joseph here. Maybe he sees this as a chance to gain a little advantage over his mean older brothers. You know, “Na na na na na!” I had a dream and you all bowed down to me!

I’m convinced that sharing the content of that dream with his brothers was a foolish mistake. He was just pouring fuel on the fire. Joseph was increasing his brothers’ hostility. Why did Joseph do that? There is no indication that God instructed him to share the content of the dream. So why did Joseph share the content of his dream with his brothers? Didn’t Joseph realize how his brothers would react? Was he just naive or stupid? ¹⁸

Go back and read the story in Genesis 37:1-11 one more time. Then refer to Gen. 42:6. Did Joseph's brothers bow down to him? Then these dreams of Joseph were not the concoctions of some young man seeking to humiliate his antagonizing brothers. Instead, the dreams of Joseph were prophetic. How, then, does this pastor become convinced that Joseph was wrong to share the dreams?

While this pastor's point of view seems to be somewhat extreme, it nevertheless captures what so many preachers and teachers – and thus church members who follow them – generally believe about Joseph. Once again, if we are to understand the truth of the story, we must not listen to what “thus saith my pastor,” as we should first begin with studying what “thus saith the Lord.”

The Bible does not tell us how the brothers reacted to the evil reports concerning them that Joseph had given to Jacob. However, when Joseph wore the coat given to him by his father, the Bible says his brothers hated him (verse 4). Then, when Joseph shared his first dream with his brothers, the Bible says they “hated him even more” (verse 5).

One might argue that the brothers were not angry with the dreams as much as they were angry that Joseph told them about the dreams. Yet verse eight says “they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.” In other words, the brothers were not just angry that Joseph told them about the dreams. They were angry that he would even dare to dream such dreams – as if Joseph had control over what he dreamed.

Maybe what has happened here is that too many commentators have allowed the reaction of the brothers to reflect back on Joseph so that he bears some of the blame for the situation. Those who do so are guilty of determining Joseph's motives by the reaction his words had on his audience.

In the language of today's cultural philosophy, such an interpretation accuses Joseph of “hate speech.” The fact that Joseph dreamed such dreams was bad enough, but for him to share them with others was completely unacceptable behavior. In today's culture, to speak truth to others who are offended by our speech is not only offensive but intolerable. If what we say causes another person to hate us for saying it, then what we said must be considered hateful speech.

Not only is such a concept wrong in today's culture. It is equally an error to project the beliefs of modern culture backwards to ancient times.

Once again, there is no evidence, short of conjecture and a dependence on fallacious tradition, that Joseph revealed his dreams to his family for any other reasons but curiosity and a simple desire to understand the meaning behind the dreams. Joseph did nothing more than share the dreams given him by God.

He may have given a bad report, but there is no evidence that the report was false or that Joseph intended any malice. He may have worn a coat that offended his brothers, but he most likely did so out of respect for his father. To believe – and even worse, to preach – that Joseph allowed

these dreams to go to his head and that he intentionally allowed these dreams to create division in his family is conjecture and not based on what the Bible actually says.

Joseph was a dreamer – persecuted because he exercised the gift of God. Here was one man in the crowd who, in the midst of idolatry and hatred, was willing to proclaim the message from God – even though he may not have understood it as such at the time – and we accuse him of pride. How sad.

A quick word study will show that the Bible records 21 dreams by fourteen different people. One could argue that there were many more than 21 if visions are included in the number. The Old Testament seems to equate the two – visions and dreams – on some occasions (For examples, refer to Daniel 7:1, Job 33:15, and Isaiah 29:7.) For the sake of argument, however, we will assume that dreams occur while one is asleep and visions while one is awake.

Regardless of whether or not dreams and visions are categorized together or separately, all of those episodes clearly identified as dreams have one thing in common – they are known. The only way that a dream can become known is for the dreamer to share it with other people. Yet no other dreamer in the Bible is accused of pride for having shared their dreams except Joseph, the son of Jacob.

Abraham, Joseph’s great-grandfather, had dreams in which God promised to make him a nation that would outnumber the stars in the sky and the sands of the sea. Since we know about those dreams, we have to assume that Abraham told someone about them – most likely, his family. Yet no one dares to accuse Abraham of pride for doing so.

Jacob himself had several dreams in which God promised to deliver him from the trials before him and to make of him a great nation, reaffirming the promises made to Abraham and Isaac. Since those dreams are recorded in great detail in the Old Testament, Jacob had to have told someone about them. They were so well-preserved that Moses, the son of Levi, grandson of Jacob, was able to write them down in detail in the book of Genesis.

How did Moses learn about those dreams unless Jacob told his family about them? Why is there no accusation of pride made against Jacob for having shared his dreams – dreams that certainly indicated that Jacob would be one of the greatest men that ever lived – greater than anyone else in his family?

Chapter 7 of the book of Daniel tells about “visions of his head as he lay in his bed” that Daniel experienced while a captive in Babylon. At the end of verse one, we learn that Daniel “wrote down the dream and told the sum of the matter.” Keil and Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament paraphrases those final words of verse 1: “Immediately thereafter Daniel wrote down the principal parts of the dream, that it might be publicly proclaimed.”¹⁹

Daniel did not intend to share his dream with just a few close relatives. He intended for the whole kingdom to know about it. Yet there is no biblical commentator who would venture to accuse

Daniel of being guilty of the abhorrent crime of pride for his actions. One reason may be that there is no indication that Daniel's family and friends were angered by his dreams.

Interestingly, there is another man named Joseph in the New Testament who also dreamed dreams. This Joseph was the husband of Mary and the earthly father of Jesus. On four different occasions, the Bible records that Joseph had dreams. In the first of these, Joseph was informed that his wife, Mary, would give birth to the Messiah – the most longed for person in all of Jewish history (Matt. 1:20-21).

Since we know about the dream, Joseph had to have related it to others. Why? Could it be because Joseph was filled with pride at being the earthly father of the Messiah? Should we not condemn him for sharing such a dream with others who could easily covet such a revelation and hate Joseph for it?

On other occasions, God gave Joseph specific instructions on when and where to move his family to protect the life of Jesus (Matt. 2:13, 19, 22). Once again, Joseph had to have shared his dreams since no one could have known about them had he not. Here the response of every commentator is the same: not one of them accuses Joseph of pride for sharing his dreams.

One commentator who did not necessarily buy into the idea that pride motivated Joseph's revelation of his dreams to his family was Alexander MacLaren.

Note that Joseph did not tell his dreams with elation, or with a notion that they meant anything particular. It is plainly the singularity of them that makes him repeat them, as is clearly indicated by the repeated 'behold' in his two reports. With perfect innocence of intention, and as he would have told any other strange dream, the lad repeats them. The commentary was the work of his brothers, who were ready to find proofs of his being put above them, and of his wish to humiliate them, in anything he said or did. ²⁰

Conclusion

A study of the life of Joseph will reveal that the Bible never makes even one negative statement about the character of Joseph, a biblical personality understood by many to be a precursor or type of Christ. Nothing in his life ever indicates that Joseph ever responded to any person or situation except with absolute humility.

To refer to his actions and attitude toward his family in Gen. 37 as prideful is unfortunate; even worse, it is bad exegesis. To teach it as biblical truth borders on false doctrine.

James Boice said of Joseph...

“He was loved and hated, favored and abused, tempted and trusted, exalted and abased. Yet at no point in the one-hundred-and-ten-year life of Joseph did he ever seem to get his eyes off God or cease to trust him. Adversity did not harden his character. Prosperity did not ruin him. He was the same in private as in public. He was a truly great man.”²¹

Read what the *Expositor's Bible Commentary* has to say about Joseph:

In Joseph we meet a type of character rare in any race...what chiefly strikes one in Joseph is a combination of grace and power...self-control and incorruptible purity...Joseph had a surplus of power which enabled him to be cheerful and alert in doleful circumstances...He had Abraham's dignity and capacity, Isaac's purity and power of self-devotion, Jacob's cleverness and buoyancy and tenacity. From his mother's family he had personal beauty, humour, and management...the conduct of his father and brothers towards him must have made him self-conscious, even though he had been wholly innocent of introspection.²²

Certainly Joseph was sinful, as are we all, and pride may have been a challenge for him at times. One might even argue that the reason Joseph was so humble in his later life was due to the traumatic experiences of nearly dying at the hands of his brothers who were angered by his prideful behavior, of then being sold into slavery, and facing an indefinite prison sentence. The problem is that the Bible does not tell us this is true.

Though the 19th Century language may sound a bit over-done for a 21st Century reader, Charles Spurgeon had a completely different take on the character of Joseph from more contemporary authors and commentators:

When he was a boy, his father loved him. The youth was fair and beautiful; in person he was to be admired; moreover, he had a mind that was gigantic, and an intellect that was lofty; but, best of all, in him dwelt the Spirit of the living God. He was one who talked with God; a youth of piety and prayerfulness; beloved of God, even more than he was by his earthly father. O! how his father loved him! for in his fond affection, he made him a princely coat of many colors, and treated him better than the others – a natural but foolish way of showing his fondness. Therefore his brethren hated him. Full often did they jeer at the youthful Joseph, when he retired to his prayers; when he was with them at a distance

from his father's house, he was their drudge, their slave; the taunt, the jeer, did often wound his heart, and the young child endured much secret sorrow. ²³

While Spurgeon's interpretation of Joseph is certainly more flattering than the examples viewed previously, nevertheless, honesty requires one to note that, like the interpretations that view Joseph as prideful in his conduct with his brothers, there is much more conjecture in this interpretation by Spurgeon than there is biblical interpretation. Within the context of Genesis 37, there is no specific statement that would allow one to describe Joseph as having a gigantic mind or a lofty intellect, of practicing a pious and prayerful habit of life, or of having been tormented by his brothers on a continual basis.

But neither is there even one specific statement that would lead to the contrary conclusion – that Joseph acted out of ignorance or pride in dealing with his family or others.

Instead, we see young man of extreme integrity serve as a prophet of God, then live to see those very prophecies fulfilled in his lifetime, and even to serve as the instrument by which the will of God was accomplished.

NOTES

- ¹ Artson, Rabbi Bradley. "From Pride Comes Loneliness." MyJewishLearning, Inc. Web. 21 Nov. 2014.
http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts/Bible/Weekly_Torah_Portion/vayeshev_artson5762.shtml
- ² <http://biblehub.com/commentaries/guzik/genesis/37.htm>
- ³ <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/joseph-goes-dothan/>
- ⁴ <http://www.gotquestions.org/life-Joseph.html#ixzz3Jje6ENTI>
- ⁵ Lange, John Peter. *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Critical, Doctrinal, Homiletical, Vol. 1*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark. 1864, p 580.
- ⁶ Exell, Joseph S; Spence-Jones, Henry Donald Maurice. "Commentary on [Genesis 37:1](#)". *The Pulpit Commentary*.
<http://www.studydrive.org/commentaries/tpc/view.cgi?bk=0&ch=37>. 1897
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- ⁸ Nicoll, William R. "Commentary on [Genesis 37:1](#)". "Expositor's Bible Commentary".
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- ¹² If interested, you can read [this verse is nearly 40 translations](#) at biblegateway.com.
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