

# The Sounds of Silence: What Happens at the Well with Joseph and His Brothers

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We now come to the pivotal moment of Joseph at the well/pit. Interactions at wells tend to be important in Genesis. Isaac and Jacob's wives are first introduced at wells. One of the characteristics of the Joseph story is that it is "told twice". The conventional explanation of this is that we have a combination of E and J narratives. There may be an additional explanation: those who have undergone childhood abuse have a cacophony of memories. There is the memory of what has occurred, then there is a memory overlaid with guilt and shame and there may also be an "alternative" memory of events supplied by the abuser.

There is no doubt that some of the brothers want to kill Joseph. Why would they want to kill him? Because he is an obnoxious younger brother with self-aggrandizing dreams and "favored" status? This is a credible theory. But there is another credible theory. We have to entertain the notion, distasteful, as it is, that Joseph may not be the only brother in this family who is abused. Alternatively, certainly once the coat with sleeves is bestowed on Joseph; the brothers could understand what is transpiring and seek to erase this stain from their family.

We must also recognize that this is a heterogeneous group of brothers. They have different mothers and the mothers have different statuses. Despite being the "less loved", Leah is the one with the highest status: she is the first wife and the most fertile. Rachel only has two children and the other mothers are slaves. The brothers also represent a wide spectrum of ages. So this fraternal conclave at the well/pit is likely to be a fractious meeting. Reuven, the most mature and secure, the first son, is the least bloodthirsty. Judah also offers a more moderate proposal for getting rid of Joseph (Genesis 37:26-27).

## Discussion Questions

1. Are all the brothers there at the same time? Doesn't this strike you as odd? Surely the brothers are usually spread out over the pasturelands. What season of animal husbandry would bring all of them together in one place?
2. We tend to telescope time when we read biblical stories. For example, we look at the ten plagues as if they happen on consecutive days when it is more realistic to see them as happening over the course of a year. Is it logical to suppose that this meeting at the well took at least several hours, if not days? Is it possible that in this time, the truth of what has been going on between Jacob and Joseph finally comes to the surface?
3. If this is the case, does it not make sense that the brothers then decide to help Joseph make his escape? Could they then formulate the plan to confront Jacob with the garment Joseph associates with his abuse? Could this confrontation serve yet another purpose? Could it prevent Jacob from pursuing Joseph? Are the brothers helping Joseph make a clean getaway? And could this confrontation with the bloody, torn coat send Jacob another message: that the brothers now know what happened and will not tolerate it if he threatens Benjamin with such behavior?

I know this reading is a hard one, because we lose Jacob as a major hero. But this reading also casts the brothers in a new light. We have an exchange rate of 1 hero for 10. And we have role models for helping those trapped by abuse to make an escape. Maybe this exchange rate can make this reading worth the pain it may cause.

Looking forward to your insights, as always!