

The Plot to kill Joseph by his Brothers (Gen 37:2-36): It's Place within the Joseph Story and Lessons for Christians in Nigeria

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Abstract: *Joseph is the twelfth son of Jacob, born of Rachel his beloved wife. The preferential love of Joseph by Jacob was clearly manifest to the other children who, as well as their mothers, were not, as the case may be, equally loved by Jacob. This elicited the serious hatred of Joseph by these other siblings, a hatred that Joseph also aggravated by his dominance-indicating dreams. The chilling result was that Joseph's brothers then planned to kill him. They were actually in the process of executing this plot when providence kindly intervened by providing Ishmaelite traders who then bought Joseph and sold him as a slave in Egypt (Gen 37:2-36). That brothers should plan to kill a brother, is, certainly, highly obnoxious, evil and repugnant to everything good. But there is more to it all, in the story of Joseph. This article, therefore, aims at studying this plan by the brothers to kill Joseph, situating it appropriately within the entire story of Joseph. The method employed in the study is sociological-theological, to be augmented with the Historical Critical method which will be used in the exegesis of the biblical Hebrew text when necessary. All these would help to bring out the lessons contained in this whole plot, particularly the need for thorough soul-searching on the part of all the citizens, concerning insecurity in Nigeria, a soul searching that would ultimately lead to a better social order, aided by mutual forgiveness and reconciliation. These lessons would also be urged on all believers in God, all people of goodwill and, especially, Christians in Nigeria – whose role in nation-building would, thereby, be expected to be more optimally maximized. Thus, the recommendation to all these groups is that given the ever-operative divine presence in the lives and affairs of all who believe in Him, as well as appropriate human responsibility on their part, "in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28).*

Keywords: Christians in Nigeria, Insecurity, Repentance, Forgiveness, Divine Providence, Human Responsibility.

Introduction

That brothers should plan to kill their own brother is something that sends chills down the spines of most people, not to talk of where just a young lad is involved. But this is sadly the lot of Joseph, the twelfth son of Jacob born of Rachel, his beloved wife, as is largely documented in Gen 37.

This paper will, therefore, attempt a full and scholarly exposition of this phenomenon in its account. It will also explore its implications within the whole story of Joseph – and in the Pentateuch. The method to be employed in doing this, is sociological-theological, to be augmented by the Historical Critical method for the proper exegesis of the relevant sections of the text. All this would ultimately help in bringing out its lessons, beginning with the serious need for a thorough soul searching on the part of all concerned regarding insecurity in Nigeria so as to bring about a better social order aided by mutual forgiveness and reconciliation. The realization of these is the onus of all who believe in God, all people of good will but especially for Christians in Nigeria as, under divine guidance, they responsibly struggle to live out their faith, despite the odds, in order to improve, in whatever ways possible, the society in which they live.

Delimitation of Text

The story of Joseph begins with Gen 37:2: "This is the story of the family of Jacob ..." Wenham has observed that it is usual in these titles (cf. 11:26; 25:19) for the father (Terah, Isaac) of the main character (Abraham, Jacob, and here Joseph) to be named. Hence, in this case, that title points to the events that took place when Jacob was head of the extended family. On that note, the commentators who regard Gen 37:1 as the start of the Joseph story, fail to realize that it is the close of the story of Esau in chap. 36. Thus, Gen 37:2 is the start of a new section in Genesis, which closes at 50:26.¹ Generally speaking, therefore, those chapters, Gen 37-50, are popularly regarded as Joseph's Story, since "Joseph is the focal point" in them.²

But the story of the plot to kill Joseph by the brothers in Gen 37:2-36 is a unit in itself within the story of Joseph – clearly the last major section of Genesis. "This last major section of Genesis is a closely integrated unit, but 37:2-36 constitutes a clear unit

¹ G. WENHAM, *Genesis 16-50* (Word Biblical Commentary 2; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1994) 348-349.

² R. J. CLIFFORD – R. E. MURPHY, "Genesis", *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Bangalore: Theological Publications, 1994) 36.

within it, since chap. 38 constitutes a distinct interlude between 37:36 and 39:1.”³ Hence, v. 36 forms the transition to chapter 39. It is actually so similar to 39:1 that “it has probably been formed from it.”⁴

Finally, that this text is a unit is clearly brought out, thematically, by the literary device of *inclusio* which the author masterfully achieves by the use of the garment motif: Joseph’s special garment (as sign of Jacob’s love) being one of the sources of the hatred of the brothers for Joseph (Gen 37:3) at the beginning of the story; and again ending the plot with the same motif, as the father recognised his son’s garment and began to mourn profusely, rending his garments too (Gen 37:33). This helps to establish the unity of the text incontestably.

Therefore, this article considers the plot to kill Joseph by his brothers in Gen 37:2-36 as a unit. This unit could be divided as: the background and causes of the plot (Gen 37:2-11) as well as the plot itself and its actual execution (Gen 37:12-36). In fact, in vv. 2-11, the threefold refrain, “they hated him” (vv. 4, 5 and 8) which culminates in v. 11, “his brothers were very jealous of him,” sets the scene for the whole story while vv. 12-35 constitute 8 scenes which are neatly linked together. Hence, “to split the material between two sources undermines the unity of the scenes.”⁵

The Biblical Text of Gen 37:2-36

The Background of the Plot (Gen 37:2-11)

Joseph was the son of Rachel, the beloved wife of Jacob, as already said. Jacob, in turn, loved him “more than any other of his children” because he was the son of his old age. And owing to this love, Jacob made him a “long robe with sleeves” (Gen 37:3).

Joseph had two dreams which he related to his brothers (Gen 37:5-11). In the first dream, he was binding sheaves with them in the field and, as he told them, “behold, your sheaves gathered round it, and bowed down to my sheaf” (Gen 37:7). And in the second dream, similar to the first, “the sun, the moon and eleven stars, were bowing down to me” (Gen 37:9).

Joseph’s brothers, as, perhaps, would be expected, were not pleased by these dreams. Responding to the first, they, then, answered him: “Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to have dominion over us?” (Gen 37:8). And for the second dream, his father rebuked him 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).

Causes of the Plot (Gen 37:2-11)

Evidently, the ill-feeling of the brothers to Joseph began when they perceived, as recounted above, that their father loved him more than all of them. Therefore “they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him” (Gen 37:4). This hatred increased after the first dream, as “they hated him yet more for his dreams and for his words” (Gen 37:9). Then the climax came with the second dream, for Joseph’s brothers became “jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind” (Gen 37:11).

The Plot Itself and its actual Execution (Gen 37:12-36)

From the account above, the stage was gradually setting for this plot. When, therefore, Jacob sent Joseph to inquire about the well-being of the brothers and of the flock, their hatred and jealousy for him finally found expression (Gen 37:12-14). As they saw Joseph from afar coming to them at Dothan, they conspired together thus: “Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild beast has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams” (Gen 37:19-20).

And when the Ishmaelites bought him and sent him to Egypt, the brothers killed a goat, dipped Joseph’s garment into its blood and presented it to their father – thus covering up their plot (Gen 37:31-33).

Textual Analysis: Some Difficulties

On account of the preferential love which Joseph got from his father – which has been noted above – Jacob made him “a long robe with sleeves” (*kātonet passim*) (v. 3). The LXX describes it as “spotted garment” (*chitona poikilon*). However, what was special about this robe is uncertain, as its traditional renderings as “coat of many colours” or “coat with sleeves” “are sheer guesses from the context.”⁶ But its only other occurrence, outside this text, in 2 Sam 13:18-19 – describing a garment worn by daughters of kings – may give some insight. Be that as it may and whatever that robe may have looked like, “it marked Jacob’s special affection for Joseph and served as a perpetual reminder to his brothers.”⁷

The difficult situation is not helped in any way by the “ill report” (*dibātām rā’āh*) brought by Joseph to the father (Gen 37:2) about the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, the slave-wives of Jacob, who – as also the sons of Leah – did not enjoy much love from

³ WENHAM, *Genesis 16-50*, 349.

⁴ C. WESTERMANN, *Genesis 37-50* (London: SPCK, 1986) 44.

⁵ WENHAM, *Genesis 16-50*, 349-350.

⁶ E. A. SPEISER, *Genesis* (Anchor Bible 1; New York: Doubleday, 1964) 289.

⁷ WENHAM, *Genesis 16-50*, 351.

Jacob as those of Rachel. The word *dibāh* in Hebrew, means “evil report”⁸ and this is further underlined in this text by the adjective *rā’āh* (bad, evil). “So it seems likely that Joseph misrepresented his brothers to his father, his father believed him, and his brothers hated him for his lies. If his account was true, it would doubtless have enraged his brothers, especially since their father had never held them in high regard anyway.”⁹ Also after Joseph had related his first dream to his brothers, those brothers “hated him yet more for his dreams and for his words” (Gen 37:8). “His words” (*dabārāw*) here, apart from reminding one of that “ill report” just referred to above, also applies to his dreams, i.e. perhaps, the manner in which he related them – as would still be referred to below.

There are also difficulties in this text about what happened to Joseph, how he was sold, who sold him and to whom, especially with regard to vv. 18-30, and 36 of chapter 37; and v. 1 of chapter 39.

On the question of how he was sold, Westermann – who largely admits of “a unified and self-contained course of events” in these verses – sees two “variants” in the story, very clear from the attempts made by Reuben and Judah respectively, to rescue Joseph: Reuben appeals to the brothers to cast him into a pit instead of killing him (Gen 37:22). Judah repeats the same plea, suggesting that they should sell him to the Ishmaelites instead of killing “our brother, our own flesh” (Gen 37:26-27). The brothers listen to Judah and sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites. The variants of Westermann would then consist in vv. 25b, 26, 27 (Judah’s intervention) and 28b, as against the major section of Reuben (especially seen in vv. 21-22) in chapter 37.¹⁰ For him, three reasons confirm this variance: “It is an obvious doublet with a cohesive course of events: the intention of the brothers, motivation, advice given to them, heed of advice, Joseph goes to Egypt. The names of the brothers and the description of the caravans vary. It is scarcely possible for a variant to be so clearly defined.”¹¹

In line with Westermann, many scholars (including Gunkel, Redford and Schmidt) explain this situation “by means of classical source division as two separate narratives, J and E, each more or less complete.”¹² Hence, Speiser distinguishes these two sources in that narrative, maintaining that “J” used the name Israel, featured Judah as Joseph’s protector and “identified the Ishmaelites as the traders who bought Joseph from his brothers. The other (E) spoke of Jacob as the father and named Reuben as Joseph’s friend; the slave traders in that version were Midianites who discovered Joseph by accident and sold him to Potiphar.”¹³

Rashi, on his part, tries to solve the particular problem of the Ishmaelites and Midianites (Gen 37:27-28) by suggesting a three-fold selling. Nehama Leibowitz cites him thus: “This was another caravan, the text informing us that he was sold many times. ‘They drew’ refers to the sons of Jacob – they took him out of the pit and sold him to the Ishmaelites and the Ishmaelites to the Midianites and the Midianites to the Egyptians.”¹⁴

But this last postulation still leaves unresolved the question of the Ishmaelites mentioned in this connection in chapter 39:1 – hence the emphasis of E.I. Lowenthal that it was the Midianites who sold Joseph: “While the brothers camped on the hill for their meal, they could not see the Midianites who, hearing Joseph’s cries for help, pulled him up from the cistern and sold him to the Ishmaelites who happened to pass by.”¹⁵

All things considered, this work sees the text of Gen 37:2-36 as a united one, as already demonstrated above, in the “intrinsic unity” of the story of Joseph which has given that story its undeniable literary quality and power – ultimately leading to the “tendency to attribute it to one author (whether the Yahwist or another).”¹⁶ In other words, even if there had been “two separate accounts of his brothers against Joseph,” as has also been postulated, “this diversity, however, does not detract from the overall unity of a narrative that has been carefully crafted.”¹⁷ Above all, the Midianites are actually Ishmaelites:

Rather, it seems better to take Ishmaelites and Midianites as alternative designations of the same group of traders. This must at least be the understanding of the editor of Genesis, as Gunkel (409) pointed out, for 37:36 says the Midianites sold Joseph to Potiphar, whereas 39:1 says Potiphar bought him from the Ishmaelites. And this is confirmed by Judg 8:24, which explains that the Midianites had earrings “because they were Ishmaelites.”¹⁸

⁸ F. BROWN – S. DRIVER – C. BRIGGS, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996) 179.

⁹ WENHAM, *Genesis 16-50*, 350.

¹⁰ WESTERMANN, *Genesis 37-50*, 40.

¹¹ WESTERMANN, *Genesis 37-50*, 40.

¹² J. J. SCULLION, “The Narrative of Genesis”, in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 954.

¹³ SPEISER, *Genesis*, 293 - 294.

¹⁴ N. LEIBOWITZ, *Studies In the Book Of Genesis* (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1972) 400.

¹⁵ E. I. LOWENTAL, *The Joseph Narrative In Genesis* (New York: Ktav, 1973) 28.

¹⁶ R. J. CLIFFORD – R. E. MURPHY, “Genesis”, 36.

¹⁷ R. J. FALEY, *From Genesis to Apocalypse* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005) 76.

¹⁸ WENHAM, *Genesis 16-50*, 355.

With this observation, the problem of multiple sources in this text with regard to the selling of Joseph becomes actually further reduced.

The Main Features of the Story

Four main features in the story of this plot by the brothers to kill Joseph deserve special mention at this point. The first three are: the preferential love of Jacob for Joseph, the garment motif and the dream motif. The fourth, but actually the primary one, is God's providence. Apart from arousing the plot to kill Joseph, as mentioned above, these first three factors are certainly among the enhancing aspects sustaining and advancing the entire narrative to its very end. All of them then come under the all embracing providence of God.

Thus, specifically stated, the responsibility for the bitter and unhealthy rivalry which developed between the sons of Jacob is squarely laid on the shoulders of Jacob himself – his preferential love of Joseph. If Jacob had not shown such brazen partiality in loving Joseph, the animosity among his children could not have reached such a despicable height: "Here we see the dire effects of sin on human behaviour. Jacob's favouritism turns normal sibling rivalry into deadly hatred, so that Joseph's brothers plot to kill him. And Jacob is blind to the effects of his actions on his sons."¹⁹

Regarding the garment issue, that the "long robe with sleeves" could also be a point of serious bitterness against Joseph by the brothers could be seen from these words of Brueggemann: "The giving of the robe has been equivalent to enthronement (v.3). Jacob thereby designated his son as his special heir."²⁰ In other words, "their father intended to transfer to Joseph the right of the first-born."²¹ And from every indication, Joseph's brothers seemed to have been aware of this rather grave nuance to the entire story.

Consequently, before throwing the young lad into the pit, they first "stripped him" of that robe (Gen 37:23). And to conceal their crime, when the boy was gone, they killed a goat and dipped the robe in its blood and sent it to their father. The latter recognised it and began mourning uncontrollably (Gen 37: 31-34) – as already stated. Jacob's words, while he mourned, actually helps to sustain the heightened tempo of the entire episode in this chapter: "It is my son's robe; a wild beast has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces" (Gen 37:33). The attentive reader, acutely aware of the entire plot, cannot but be struck with deep sympathy for this old man who has totally been helmed into the deceptive tricks and harrowing machinations of his own children, even to the point of repeating their very words as they initially planned it: "Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits", they had said, "then we shall say that a wild beast has devoured him ..." (Gen 37:20). In fact, this skilful act of concealment on the part of those children finally sealed their callous intention and action, as they remorselessly watched their father mourning while they hypocritically pretended to be consoling him – all to no avail, of course (Gen 37:35).

On another note, Joseph's ordeal in this chapter also stems from dreams, as already shown: The brothers hated Joseph "yet more for his dreams and for his words" (Gen 37:9). From these, Edersheim surmises, regarding Joseph, that "there must have been something peculiarly offensive in the manner in which he told his dreams," to the point that Jacob saw reason to reprove him, although he also "kept the saying in mind" (Gen 37:11). But he then concludes: "As we now know it, they were prophetic dreams; but, at the time, there were no means of judging whether they were so or not, especially as Joseph had so 'worded' them, that they might seem to be merely the effect of vanity in a youth whom favouritism had unduly elated. The future could alone show this..."²²

Most importantly, there is the aspect of divine providence actively operating, even though largely imperceptibly, in this whole episode in Gen 37. The picture only becomes clearer as the episodes of the story progress. Hence, throughout the ancient world, including in Genesis, dreams were considered revelatory, as messages from God.²³ Even though it was not so expressly stated in the case of Joseph's dreams in this chapter, the implications become evident as the events gradually unfold. Furthermore, when the brothers threw Joseph into a pit, just then, providentially, an Arab caravan was coming in sight, and their immediate intervention in "buying" Joseph as a slave pushed the narrative to another level. Therefore, God's providence was with Joseph and all his experiences in this chapter of our consideration. He was actually God's instrument, one has to say, as this paper now goes on to show.

The Place of the Plot to kill Joseph in the entire Joseph story

The Joseph story is a continuous one whose every episode is essential to the narration of the next one. It is for this reason that the entire block from Gen 37:1 to 47:27 (except 38:1-30 and 46:1-27) has often been referred to as the world's first novel.²⁴ In fact, the Joseph story is a long "well knit literary masterpiece, and a necessary and dramatic plot which takes the tiny Hebrew tribe

¹⁹ WENHAM, *Genesis 16-50*, 359.

²⁰ W. BRUEGGEMANN, *Genesis* (Atlanta: Westminster John Knox, 1986) 304.

²¹ A. EDERSHEIM, *Bible History: Old Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995) 102.

²² EDERSHEIM, *Bible History: Old Testament*, 102.

²³ WENHAM, *Genesis 16-50*, 359.

²⁴ L. BOADT, "Genesis", in *The International Bible Commentary* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998) 386.

from Palestine into Egypt and into captivity in order to prepare for the Exodus"²⁵ – and Joseph is centrally instrumental to all these. Yet, it is this plan by his brothers to kill him which presents the basic episode that gradually develops into the other ones. In that episode, as already said, the three motifs of the preferential love of Joseph by Jacob, the garment and the dream motifs all play important roles – under the masterful guide of providence – attractively propelling the entire narrative to its very remarkable end.

Hence, the important place of the garment motif in Gen 37:2-36 goes beyond that chapter in the further advancement of the story of Joseph: It was Joseph's garment that Potiphar's wife used against him when Joseph refused to yield to her sexual approaches, resulting in his being imprisoned (Gen 39:11-20). And finally, apart from Pharaoh's words of installation, it was the change of garments into royal ones that helped to mark Joseph's position as the second in Egypt (Gen 41:42).

The dream motif also plays a similar role. The plot of Joseph's story "commences with the dreams of Joseph and follows out the suspenseful consequences until the dreams have all come true."²⁶ Thus, Joseph's dreams were strong contributors to the hatred of his brothers for him, as already shown. Yet, it was dreams which also helped Joseph to rise to his status of greatness in Egypt. For, after successfully interpreting the dreams of the cup bearer and the baker (Gen 40: 9-19), he was recommended to interpret those of Pharaoh (Gen 41:9-45) which earned him his high position. In that high position, Joseph's dreams became ultimately fulfilled in Egypt as his brothers eventually came and, indeed, bowed down to him, the lord of the land of Egypt – completely unaware of the fact that he was actually their brother Joseph who they had earlier remorselessly sold into slavery (Gen 42:6; 43:26,28; 44:14). Hence, "without the dream there would be no Joseph and no narrative. From the perspective of the brothers, without the dream there would be no trouble or conflict. For the father, without the dream there would be no grief or loss. The dream sets its own course, the father-brothers-dreamer notwithstanding."²⁷

Furthermore, that the dreams are recorded in doublets (cf. also those of Pharaoh and the Cup bearer in Gen 40:1-41:36) is a device of the author to vividly keep his imagery, in the entire story, in the minds of his readers. It suggests the certainty of fulfilment, that "the thing is established by God" (Gen 41:32)²⁸ – thereby strongly highlighting the place of divine providence in the whole plot.

Consequently, the most outstanding feature of Joseph's story is that it is a story of divine providence, showing "how God's secret providence is behind the darkest deeds of men and works to their ultimate good."²⁹ Joseph himself underlines this blissful providential twist to his brothers on two occasions. The first is when he reveals himself to them for the first time, saying:

I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; and he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt (Gen 44:4-8).

The second occasion is after the death of their father, Jacob, when the brothers, out of fear, formally come to him to apologize, also putting it into the mouth of their dead father that he has given them "the command" that Joseph should forgive them (Gen 50: 15-19). Joseph weeps and then remarkably says to them: "Fear not, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Gen 50:19-20).

It is in this light also that Joseph's story maintains a very strong connection with the book of Genesis and the Pentateuch in general. It links the history of the patriarchs with their settlement in Egypt, explaining how Jacob and his sons, hitherto living in Canaan, came to settle in Egypt from where they left, centuries later, to go back (in Exodus) to the Promised Land (cf. Ps 105). Hence, the theme of the Pentateuch further unfolds in the story: God had promised to make Abraham a great nation, to bless him and make his name great, and by him, to bless all the families of the earth (Gen 12:2-3). In Joseph's story, Jacob's family grows from twelve to seventy, and, on blessing them, Jacob sees each of them as a great tribe (Gen 49). Furthermore, Joseph providentially rises to greatness from slavery and imprisonment, in Egypt, rising to a position next to the Pharaoh. Ultimately, also, the promised blessing to "all the families of the earth" began to be fulfilled in Egypt, as Joseph saved his own family, the Egyptians and all the neighbouring peoples from starvation.³⁰ That is the story of Joseph which actually begins from Gen 37 in the plot of his brothers to kill him.

The Theological Emphasis of the Story of Joseph

²⁵ P. M. IGBO, *Introduction to the Old Testament Books and Pseudepigrapha* (Enugu: Claretian Publications, 2020) 127.

²⁶ BOADT, "Genesis", in *The International Bible Commentary*, 386.

²⁷ BRUEGGEMANN, *Genesis*, 298-299.

²⁸ Cf. WENHAM, *Genesis 16-50*, 351.

²⁹ WENHAM, *Genesis 16-50*, 357.

³⁰ WENHAM, *Genesis 16-50*, 357-358.

Joseph is the patriarch with whom modern readers can also identify most easily: the spoilt brat who develops, through adversity, into a mature and competent leader; the unfairly persecuted lad who finally becomes top man and shows magnanimity to his persecutors. Joseph is the one despised and rejected by his family but who ultimately became the agent of their salvation and that of countless others. Above all, in the story of Joseph, one sees how God's secret providence brings out good results from the darkest deeds of men,³¹ as already said. Therefore, two aspects, theologically speaking, stand out in the entire story: divine providence and human responsibility.

Joseph was fully aware of God's role in his ordeals and eventual success, a fact he clearly expressed to his brothers – as already shown above – and he also profoundly cooperated with that providence by behaving responsibly throughout that story. However, specifically speaking, it was the lengthy but passionate, remorseful and repentance-coloured appeal of Judah for the release of Benjamin (Gen 44:18-34), which was naturally followed by Joseph's emotional self-disclosure to his brothers, that began the actual process of reconciliation among the warring brothers and led the entire family to finally migrate to Egypt. Judah had even earlier acknowledged their corporate guilt openly before Joseph (Gen 44: 16) shortly before he made that speech, in what has been described as "a significant admission,"³² sequel to a much earlier admission of the same guilt by all the brothers together (Gen 42:21). But in this latest speech, he (Judah) finally "proves his sincerity above all doubt by offering himself as a slave in place of Benjamin."³³ Therefore, the natural conclusion is that Joseph's brothers were haunted by a burden of guilt that was never far from the surface, "and Joseph still harbours a lot of feeling of resentment, which time and success may have helped to blunt, but could not altogether obliterate."³⁴

Consequently, Joseph forgave his brothers completely, but not without making sure that they were really repentant and this brought final reconciliation and healing to the family. Thus, "whereas Judah had been happy to sell Joseph into slavery, make money on the deal (37:27), and disregard his father's distress, now Judah pleads to be allowed to 'stay instead of the boy as my master's slave, and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father without the boy and see the calamity that will befall my father'" (Gen 44:33-34).³⁵

In Joseph's story, therefore, both divine sovereignty and human responsibility are strongly affirmed, as already said. "That God used the brothers' hatred to send Joseph to Egypt and, there, raised him to prosperous heights, does not, according to Genesis, excuse that hate."³⁶ That exaggerated hatred was not proper – even if it was a reaction to some other unpleasant stimuli! Hence, the full results of that hatred were clearly brought out in the story on all those who were directly affected: Joseph, the siblings and family. Nevertheless:

Full forgiveness and reconciliation only become possible after Judah has demonstrated, in his words and in his willingness to take Benjamin's place, a sincere repentance. Though Genesis emphatically states that God uses the sins of Joseph's brothers for good, it nowhere excuses their sins or pretends they can be forgotten; rather, they needed to be acknowledged and repented of.³⁷

In all, therefore, Joseph's general behaviour to his brothers helps to propel this story to a very positive and admirable climax: Having stressed the sovereign providence in absolute terms, Joseph's intent was not to deny his brothers' guilty responsibility, as already highlighted (because his whole strategy in the story had aimed at stirring their consciences). "But now that a godly sorrow gripped them, Joseph would turn them from remorseful backward looks to thankful appropriation of the future God's mercy had provided."³⁸ And that future began immediately, as Joseph gave instructions for the entire family to be moved down to Egypt (Gen 45:8-15), confirmed by Pharaoh (Gen 45:16-20) and faithfully carried out by the brothers (Gen 45:21-28) – all leading to the final reunification of the family and the happy denouement of the whole story.

Lessons for Christians in Nigeria

The Joseph story is one that has delighted generations of hearers because it is a very realistic story which, at the same time, is profoundly optimistic.³⁹ Much could, therefore, be learnt from it especially by all who believe in God – God who has revealed

³¹ WENHAM, *Genesis 16-50*, 357.

³² CLIFFORD – MURPHY, "Genesis", in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 40.

³³ BOADT, "Genesis", in *The International Bible Commentary*, 389.

³⁴ SPEISER, *Genesis*, 335.

³⁵ WENHAM, *Genesis 16-50*, 431.

³⁶ Cf. WENHAM, *Genesis 16-50*, 432-433.

³⁷ WENHAM, *Genesis 16-50*, 433.

³⁸ M. G. KLINE, "Genesis", in D. GUTHRIE – *al*, ed., *New Bible Commentary* (Third Edition) (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1970) 110.

³⁹ WENHAM, *Genesis 16-50*, 357.

himself from the OT times – hence, particularly, Jews, Christians and Moslems. But, as already indicated, this article refers especially to Christians in Nigeria, so as to be more specifically localized.

God is omnipotent. He controls all creation and has revealed his profound love for the world through Jesus Christ (John 3:16). Christian exegetes have often seen Joseph as a type of Christ, the innocent man who through his suffering brings reconciliation to his human brethren and life to the world. It is possible to go further and view him as “a model for all believers, who like him must die to self, if they are to make peace with their neighbour.”⁴⁰ It is this “application” aspect which will be concentrated upon in this part of the paper, as already hinted.

The popular saying, that life is not a bed of roses, is true for every living person, Christian and non-Christian – indicating that there are, sometimes, problems as well as trying and difficult situations in life. The Christian understanding, however, tries to go beyond those ordinary situations to see them also as moments of grace as well as further growth and maturity in life on the basis of the Christian faith and its practice – a fact that has also been amply highlighted by the divine aspect of the experience of Joseph in our story. Thus, “in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28).

Consequently, there is much to be learnt and to be reflected upon from the story of Joseph, as already pointed out. However, this writer thinks that a very important consideration from it, within our context, would concern the present horrible state of insecurity in Nigeria that strongly threatens to even crumble the nation’s entire vehicle of state. The wanton killings, kidnappings and general violence and impunity, prevalent in Nigeria at this time, have made travelling to most parts of the country a nightmare. Two recent occurrences in this area are the Kuje Prison Break and the horrendous murder and kidnap of some travellers on an Abuja-Kaduna train – occurrences that veritably constitute serious national embarrassments.

Thus, on March 28 this year, heavily armed terrorists attacked an Abuja-Kaduna passenger train. They killed 14 persons while 63 others were officially declared abducted – and those terrorists actually got away with it! Again, on July 5, gunmen armed to the teeth attacked the Kuje Maximum Prison at Abuja, freeing over 800 inmates, including suspected Boko Haram terrorists, and leaving wanton destruction in their trail – and they also got away with it! As at this time of writing, many of those freed inmates are still at large. These two incidents occurred despite available intelligence reports about their impending occurrence even before they actually took place! One is yet to hear, up to this time of writing this paper, of any sanctions meted out on the appropriate authorities whose actions or omissions gave rise to such harrowing incidents. Then came the climax, so to speak, in the mind-bugling terror alert, strongly issued by the United States of America and some European countries – towards the end of last month (October) – an alert that still trends strongly as this paper is being written. Serious indeed!

In February this year, this writer had the opportunity to describe the situation in Nigeria as one in which most people “are daily struggling to make ends meet, in the face of abject poverty and extreme deprivation.” He had continued:

As this writer pens down these lines, many families can no longer boast of three square meals a day, galloping inflation is made more complex by the continued weakness in the purchasing value of our local currency, the Naira. Corruption is rampant. Insecurity has become the order of the day. Christians in some parts of Northern Nigeria are not free to practice their faith owing to this enduring security situation – and the government seems ultimately incapable of dealing with it! All these inevitably precipitate a near-total loss of faith, by the people, in the government and its agencies, as well as the political climate in general.⁴¹

It is needless to say that today, nine months after, the situation has not improved in any way. It has rather become much worse: The Naira has plummeted to an abysmally weak level while inflation keeps galloping, the universities are yet to fully reopen after more than eight months of strike, floods are wreaking serious havoc all over the country – mainly on account of official negligence on the part of the necessary tiers of the government. Unemployment is at 33% high; out of school children are more than 23 million – to mention but these.

Before now, the blame for the worsening insecurity in the country was often laid on the shoulders of Boko Haram terrorists, other mercenaries purportedly imported into the country, not only selfishly to destabilize it but also to totally overrun it, as well as on herders-farmers skirmishes all over the country – a narrative now seen by most people as incomplete. Rather, the bad security situation has also sadly turned into a huge and lucrative business which keeps generating millions of naira to whoever cares to engage in it, especially the unemployed youth who seem attracted to it for that quick money. For instance, the information is that over 6 billion naira was allegedly paid as ransom to the terrorists who kidnapped the train passengers mentioned above in order to secure

⁴⁰ WENHAM, *Genesis 16-50*, 360.

⁴¹ E. U. DIM, “Abraham the Father of Faith (Gene 12-17) – Challenge to Christians in Nigeria”, *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 58-59.

their safe release.⁴² What is very troubling is that in many cases, even family members have helped to “set up” and betray their fellow family members just for that pecuniary gain – and the cumulative effect of this on any community could best be imagined. No region in Nigeria could be said to be free from this development but the most worrisome to this writer is the case of the South Eastern region (*Igbo* land) which has been, until recently, one of the safest parts of the country.

The relation of kinship in Africa is generally one of brotherhood, even among those who are not blood relations: “Every segment of the African society is regarded as a family, the lineage, clan, the tribe. Even some kingdoms or states which have incorporated various ethnic groups through conquests or immigrations are still organised and administered with the family formula.”⁴³ This is true of Nigeria and even more true of Eastern Nigeria. Hence, among the *Igbo* of Eastern Nigeria, every segment is not only regarded as a family, but “functions as a family – the *Ummunna* (kindred), *Ebo* (Lineage), *Ogbe* (Village), *Obodo* (Town or Village-group). The head of each segment, the *Opkara* (first born) is, by virtue of the right of primo-geniture, the spiritual as well as the administrative head.”⁴⁴ Therefore, “for the *Igbo*, as for many Africans, to exist is to live in group, to see things with the group, to do things with the group. Life is not an individual venture, each one for himself.”⁴⁵

From the foregoing background, the reader could then imagine what the prevalently general insecurity – wanton killings, kidnappings, violent robbery e.t.c. – practically means to the average Nigerian and to the *Igbo* particularly. In *Igbo* traditional society, these acts are mostly regarded as “abominations” to God, to the society and to the land.⁴⁶ They are also very strongly condemned by the Christian Religion (yet most people in the South East of Nigeria today profess to be Christians!). The perpetrators not only destroy the very fabric of the society itself; they inflict untold harm and suffering on their victims while they, themselves, moil under a guilt-tortured existence among the same relations. This tormented existence, as already seen, reflects the situation of the brothers of Joseph among themselves and in their family, after selling Joseph – and they were simply miserable about it till their ultimate reconciliation with their brother. How does one really fathom this ugly development, particularly in the South East of Nigeria, in the face of loud and incessant calls from that same region for self autonomy? Were the *Biafra* yearning to become real today, would this be how that independence would actually function, one is forced to ask? Therefore, there is, indeed, an urgent need for a soul-searching reflection on the part of all those concerned – just as the siblings of Joseph were forced to do in their own case. Thus, while one commends the law enforcement agencies for their efforts in trying to contain the situation and sanitize it, the frank admission remains, however, that they are seriously overwhelmed by it – and, sometimes, also heavily compromised!

On another note, but as already hinted as well, Christians are not free to practice their faith in some parts of Nigeria. In fact, in some parts of Northern Nigeria, particularly, Christians are persecuted on the basis of their religion and this has really been made more complex by the official adoption of the *shari’a* legal system by many states in that part of the country – a country constitutionally designated as a secular state! The situation in Southern Kaduna, where Christians are in the majority, is actually worrisome, to say the least. Only recently, the gruesome and barbaric murder of Miss Deborah Samuel, who was barbarically burnt to death, in Sokoto by some Moslem fanatics – an action that was largely unprovoked – went viral. But despite the huge and world-wide condemnation of that dastardly act, no one has been held responsible for it even up to this time of writing. Unfortunate!

For the avoidance of doubt, it needs to be clearly stated that the Holy Bible spells it out that Christians are people of dual citizenship – of the earthly home and the eternal one. As citizens of both cities, they have obligations to both. The obligations towards the earthly city include respect and obedience to civil leaders and the authorities who are, actually, God’s ministers on earth (Rom 13:1-7; 1 Pet 2:13-17). Yet, such an obligation does not imply in any way a passive and unintelligent acquiescence to all the actions and demands of that authority. Rather, Christians are also obliged to put up an intelligent and non-violent opposition or resistance to these same institutions when the common good of all is threatened (Acts 5:12-26; Rev. 13:1-18).⁴⁷ The example of Joseph, therefore, encourages Christians in Nigeria not to be deterred by these problems but to continue being good and patriotic citizens of their fatherland, no matter the odds.⁴⁸ But they also have to be responsible in protecting themselves and their faith.

⁴² <https://www.vanguardngr.com>: Abuja-Kaduna Train Attack: Over N6 billion ransom allegedly paid to terrorists, October 9, 2022. Accessed November 29, 2022.

⁴³ E. I. METUH, *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions* (Onitsha, Imico Publishers, 1987) 182.

⁴⁴ E. I. METUH, *African Religions in Western Conceptual Schemes: The Problem of Interpretation (Studies in Igbo Religion)* (Jos: Imico Press, 1991) 114.

⁴⁵ F. A. ARINZE, *Sacrifice in Igbo Traditional Religion* (Onitsha: Brothers of St. Stephen, 2008) 6-7.

⁴⁶ METUH, *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions*, 239-241.

⁴⁷ E. U. DIM, “The Citizens’ Obligation Towards Nation Building: The Role of Christians”, in E. NWOSUH – L. IJEZIE, *Theology at the Service of National Unity (Proceedings of the 25th Annual Conference of the Catholic Theological Association of Nigeria)* (Iperu-Remo: Ambassador Publications, 2011) 174-175.

⁴⁸ To read further about the place of Christians in the State, cf. E. U. DIM, *The Christian and the Governing Authorities (Rom.13:1-7(The Nigerian Situation))* (Nimo: Rex Charles & Patrick, 2009) and E. U. DIM, “The Citizens’ Obligation Towards Nation Building: The Role of Christians”, 164-175.

All said, it is clear that the greatest problem that Nigeria has as a country, and a seemingly endemic one, is the lack of a purposeful leadership.⁴⁹ According to the United Nations' statistics, the population of Nigeria keeps growing, hitting over 218 million this year⁵⁰ – and over 49% of this number, more than 80 million, are Christians.⁵¹ Happily, too, the democratic process in Nigeria has been growing, as well, with the years. The recent signing of the new electoral bill into law by the president is seen by most Nigerians as a step in the right direction. Based on it, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has kept assuring Nigerians that free and fair elections have now finally come to stay in this country – as could be seen, according to analysts, from the most recent of these elections conducted in Anambra, Ekiti and Osun states respectively. Consequently, Nigerians can now choose the type of leaders they want – and their votes would actually count. No more rigging of elections, INEC maintains!

This is really a very welcome development especially as the general elections are coming up in February, 2023. Nigerians have to duly exercise their franchise so as to elect the leaders of their choice and improve their polity. Then could the country be able to forge ahead with clearer focus and purpose. To that end, Christians have a special responsibility because, in so doing, they also fulfil their Christian obligations to the state – as “it is essential to Christian life and Christian living for them to bring their faith to bear on the socio-political and economic life of the society in which they live.”⁵² They share this responsibility, of course, with men and women of good will who, thanks to God, also abound in Nigeria – as no right-thinking fellow is reasonably contented with the country's present disheartening situation.

Conclusion

The plot to kill Joseph by the brothers is, indeed, a shocking one. But God has, through that human evil, brought about good fortunes not only for Joseph, but for those brothers, their entire family, the whole of Egypt and the wider world as it was known during the time of writing the story. Hence, this story has been cherished by many people down the ages. But all that was possible following the heart-felt forgiveness of those brothers by Joseph – after they had manifestly repented of their wrong-doing – and the ensuing near-miraculous reconciliation of the entire family, leading finally to their ultimate migration to Egypt – all under divine guidance. From there, Israel would proceed, in the Exodus, in furtherance of the theme of the Pentateuch and even the entire salvation history. All these have been looked at in this paper.

As divine providence and human responsibility were the two major theological aspects highlighted in that story, this paper sees that episode between Joseph and his brothers as laden with lessons for all men and women of goodwill as well as all believers in God – most especially for Christians in Nigeria. God loves Nigeria.

Given the fact that the general state of insecurity in this country serves no one any ultimate good, Nigerians are called upon to undertake a serious soul searching. Since the kinship relationship of brotherhood is generally an African way of life, the wanton insecurity in Nigeria, where even family members mete out same to their fellow family members, is simply incomprehensible to say the least. This is particularly the case in Eastern Nigeria which has a predominantly large Christian population and where one also hears some clamour for some self autonomy. The experience of Joseph and the brothers then becomes a serious point of reflection especially for those concerned.

Furthermore, faced with the constant threat of persecution, as some Christians are in Nigeria, Christians are advised not to be deterred from being good citizens, as they responsibly live their lives and protect their faith, but to trust in divine providence which manifested itself clearly in the life of Joseph and his brothers. Given the fact that leadership is the greatest problem of Nigeria, and since there is the impending election during the coming year, it becomes a test case for all patriotic citizens of this country, especially Christians, to help Nigeria with the choice of a purposeful leadership which would better pilot her affairs. As God guided Joseph in all his ordeals, in spite of all the odds, this writer believes that He (God) would also guide Nigeria to a more purposeful and prosperous future given the proper responsibility of all Christians and all her citizens.

⁴⁹ C. ACHEBE, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1983) 1.

⁵⁰ <http://www.worldometer.info>world-population>. Accessed on 4th November, 2022.

⁵¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/christianity-in-nigeria>. Accessed on 4th November, 2022.

⁵² E. U. DIM, “The Citizens’ Obligation towards Nation Building: The Role of Christians”, 171-172.