

**Toledot of Jacob: Genesis 37—50**  
(The Life of Joseph)

The narrative of the life of Joseph is one of the most complex and beautiful literary masterpieces in the Bible. According to the patterns suggested here, Joseph's story is told in fourteen episodes (or *pericopes*—“puh-RICK-uh-peas”—to use terminology commonly used in biblical studies). These fourteen pericopes are organized in three overlapping patterns, so that each individual pericope is matched with one or two other pericopes. (These matches are shown below by using capital letters. For example, within each column A matches A', B matches B', and so on.) Pericopes that match each other are usually related in significant ways, such as cause-and-effect, conflict-and-resolution, or comparison-and-contrast.

Studying the patterned way that God told Joseph's story can yield theological riches—truths about God, about Joseph, about Jacob and Judah and the rest of their family, and about God's purposes in arranging and telling our own life stories.

	Sequence of Paired Stories	One Large Chiasmus	Two Small Chiasmi
37:2-11	<b>A</b> - Joseph hated by his brothers—causes	<b>A</b> - Introduction—brothers hate Joseph	<b>A</b> - Joseph's dreams
37:12-36	<b>A'</b> - Joseph hated by his brothers—results	<b>B</b> - Mourning in Hebron—over “death” of Joseph	<b>B</b> - Brothers abuse Joseph because of his dreams
38	<b>B</b> - Sexual temptation—Judah	<b>C</b> - Reversal of elder and younger sons; string tied to hand	<b>C</b> - Tamar waits in vain for help, is falsely accused
39	<b>B'</b> - Sexual temptation—Joseph	<b>D</b> - Joseph's enslavement to Egyptians	<b>D</b> - Joseph's integrity and success in Egypt
40	<b>C</b> - Joseph interprets two dreams of prisoners	<b>E</b> - Disfavor at Pharaoh's court—Egyptian servants	<b>C'</b> - Joseph, falsely accused, waits in vain for help
41	<b>C'</b> - Joseph interprets two dreams of Pharaoh	<b>F</b> - Joseph's revelation of Pharaoh's dreams	<b>B'</b> - Pharaoh honors Joseph when he interprets his dreams
42	<b>D</b> - Joseph's brothers come to Egypt for food	<b>G</b> - Center: Joseph's brothers come to Egypt for food	<b>A'</b> - Joseph's dream comes true
43-44:3	<b>D'</b> - Joseph's brothers return to Egypt for food	<b>G'</b> - Center: Joseph's brothers come to Egypt for food	<b>A</b> - Brothers return to Egypt from Canaan, bow to Joseph
44:4—45:15	<b>E</b> - Joseph reunited with part of his family	<b>F'</b> - Joseph's revelation of his identity	<b>B</b> - Joseph's great weeping—Jacob is alive
45:16—47:12	<b>E'</b> - Joseph reunited with all of his family	<b>E'</b> - Favor at Pharaoh's court—Joseph's family	<b>C</b> - Jacob comes to Egypt with all his sons
47:13-26	<b>F</b> - Joseph prospers—over Egypt	<b>D'</b> - Joseph's enslavement of Egyptians	<b>D</b> - Joseph's exaltation over all Egypt
47:27—49:32	<b>F'</b> - Joseph prospers—over his brothers	<b>C'</b> - Reversal of elder and younger sons; crossed hands	<b>C'</b> - Jacob blesses all his sons in Egypt
49:33—50:14	<b>G</b> - Death of patriarch—Jacob	<b>B'</b> - Mourning near Hebron—over death of Jacob	<b>B'</b> - Joseph's great weeping—Jacob dies
50:15-26	<b>G'</b> - Death of patriarch—Joseph	<b>A'</b> - Conclusion—brothers fear Joseph will hate them	<b>A'</b> - Brothers return to Egypt from Canaan, bow to Joseph

Credits: These chiasmi were adapted from David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1999), 59-63. This book contains hundreds of chiasmic outlines of Old Testament books and individual stories. Although I am not convinced by all outlines in Dorsey's book, I have found it incredibly stimulating and suggestive for my own study. As for the life of Joseph, many other scholars have studied its patterns and suggested outlines. Some suggest slightly different divisions and organizations (see Kenneth Mathews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, p.680, or Bruce Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, p.314). But there is widespread agreement that the Joseph narrative is a highly-ordered and unified literary and theological masterpiece.