

The Book of Genesis

Lesson 32

Chapter 37

Jacob with Israel

Genesis 37:1 Now Jacob lived in the land where his father had sojourned, in the land of Canaan.

As chapter 37 opens, Jacob was finally living in Canaan with his father. Moses had already announced the death of Isaac in a summary at the end of chapter 35, but Isaac was surely still alive at this point in Joseph's story as was explained in the commentary at the end of chapter 35. Furthermore, Esau probably had not moved to Seir and established the land of Edom at this point; however, he will do so shortly in this chapter. In chapter 35, Moses summarized the life of Isaac and in chapter 36, he summarized the life of Esau. In this chapter, Moses will return to the life of Joseph who will be the major person used by the LORD through the end of the book in the continuation of the story of Jacob's family.

Joseph Seventeen – Year 2259

Genesis 37:2 These are *the records of* the generations of Jacob. Joseph, when seventeen years of age, was pasturing the flock with his brothers while he was *still* a youth, along with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives. And Joseph brought back a bad report about them to their father.

Joseph was 17 years old and 2259 years had passed since the creation of Adam. It is interesting because Moses called Joseph a "youth," not considering him a man at this point. In this passage, Joseph was shepherding a flock with four of his half-brothers – Gad, Ashur, Dan, Naphtali. The sons of Leah were not present. These four were the sons of the two maids.

We do not know what the brother had done that caused Joseph to return with a "bad report" to his father. Whatever the reason, it was probably the beginning of the son's disdain for Joseph.

Israel/Jacob's Love for Joseph

Genesis 37:3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a varicolored tunic. ⁴ And his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers; and so they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms.

No doubt, Jacob had seen such a tunic during his time in Haran which was on the major trade route between the east and the west. Such tunics were worn all over India, Persia, Babylon and Aram. The gift of the tunic from the father was of major importance because it established in the minds of the siblings the father's sign of favoritism. In all of those cultures, at 17 years of age, the favorite son would receive a long white tunic. One important difference occurred in this story

concerning the tunic. Joseph's multicolored tunic further enhanced the favoritism of the father on Joseph. In this case, Joseph received the anger that should have been directed at the father. Nevertheless, it remains a fact of human nature that siblings may incorrectly blame siblings for the misplaced will and love of the parents. The tunic was the second strike against Joseph, resulting in his siblings' not even being able to wish him well.

Dream of Sheaves

Genesis 37:5 Then Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. ⁶ And he said to them, "Please listen to this dream which I have had; ⁷ for behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and lo, my sheaf rose up and also stood erect; and behold, your sheaves gathered around and bowed down to my sheaf." ⁸ Then his brothers said to him, "Are you actually going to reign over us? Or are you really going to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.

This dream does not help Joseph find favor in the eyes of his siblings. Why he shared this dream with his brothers we do not know. Did he not have the wherewithal to know that sharing such a dream would deepen the divide in their relationships? It was clearly the third instance that heightened their anger toward Joseph.

Dream of Sun, Moon and Stars

Genesis 37:9 Now he had still another dream, and related it to his brothers, and said, "Lo, I have had still another dream; and behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me." ¹⁰ And he related *it* to his father and to his brothers; and his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have had? Shall I and your mother and your brothers actually come to bow ourselves down before you to the ground?" ¹¹ And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying *in mind*.

The second dream added to Joseph's troubles. It, too, should not have been shared with his siblings and yet, it was the same message in a different package and the brothers were furious. Even Jacob was offended by the telling of the dream. Would Jacob and all of Joseph's half-brothers and step-mothers actually bow to this youngest member of the family? It increased the jealousy of his brothers but Moses' statement about Jacob should not be overlooked. Moses said Jacob "kept the saying *in mind*." It is a statement that indicates that Jacob somehow knew the truth of the dream.

Pasture in Shechem and Dothan

Genesis 37:12 Then his brothers went to pasture their father's flock in Shechem. ¹³ And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing *the flock* in Shechem? Come, and I will send you to them." And he said to him, "I will go." ¹⁴ Then he said to him, "Go now and see about the welfare of your brothers and the welfare of

the flock; and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem. ¹⁵ And a man found him, and behold, he was wandering in the field; and the man asked him, "What are you looking for?" ¹⁶ And he said, "I am looking for my brothers; please tell me where they are pasturing *the flock*." ¹⁷ Then the man said, "They have moved from here; for I heard *them* say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan.

This passage may actually reveal more about the extended family than what is mentioned here. Why were the sons of Jacob pasturing their flocks in Shechem 40 miles away from Hebron? It is possible that Esau's story sheds some light on this issue.

Genesis 36:6 **Then Esau took his wives and his sons and his daughters and all his household, and his livestock and all his cattle and all his goods which he had acquired in the land of Canaan, and went to *another* land away from his brother Jacob. ⁷ For their property had become too great for them to live together, and the land where they sojourned could not sustain them because of their livestock.**

Why did Jacob send Joseph to his brothers? It is possible that Jacob wanted Joseph to find them and bring them back toward Hebron because Esau had left the pastures he was using.

The grasslands of Shechem, probably the plot which Jacob had bought from Shechem's father, could not sustain the flock and the sons moved on to Dothan, 20 more miles away from Hebron.

Death Plan

Genesis 37:18 **When they saw him from a distance and before he came close to them, they plotted against him to put him to death. ¹⁹ And they said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer! ²⁰ "Now then, come and let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we will say, 'A wild beast devoured him.' Then let us see what will become of his dreams!"**

This text says, "**Here comes this dreamer!**" The Hebrew is *baal hachalomoth* which means "the master of dreams" or "the master dreamer." That phrase shows the contempt of the brothers for Joseph. In their shortsightedness, because there was a pit designed to capture wild beasts nearby, they thought they could put Joseph in that pit and when a wild beast fell into that pit, it would devour their brother. That event would bring an end to Joseph's master dreaming. Only nine of the brothers agreed with that plan.

Reuben's Rebuke

Genesis 37:21 **But Reuben heard *this* and rescued him out of their hands and said, "Let us not take his life." ²² Reuben further said to them, "Shed no blood. Throw him**

into this pit that is in the wilderness, but do not lay hands on him"-- that he might rescue him out of their hands, to restore him to his father.

Reuben did not agree with the plan. Reuben wanted to be the hero. In his plan, he would go away from the camp for a while and the others would throw Joseph into the pit. Upon Reuben's return, he would rescue Joseph from the pit and present him safe and sound to Jacob. We must wonder if this was an attempt on Reuben's part to regain favor as the firstborn in the sight of his father because of the relations he had had with Bilhah.

Reuben's Return

Genesis 37:29 Now Reuben returned to the pit, and behold, Joseph was not in the pit; so he tore his garments. ³⁰ And he returned to his brothers and said, " The boy is not *there*; as for me, where am I to go?"

Reuben's plan had gone terribly wrong. He had not anticipated the Ishmaelite/Midianite intrusion or the decision of his brothers. Reuben's chance to redeem himself with his father was gone.

Joseph's Pit

Genesis 37:23 So it came about, when Joseph reached his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the varicolored tunic that was on him; ²⁴ and they took him and threw him into the pit. Now the pit was empty, without any water in it.

Initially, the brothers agreed with Reuben and followed the plan by throwing Joseph into the pit unharmed, but without his tunic. Had someone happened upon Joseph in the pit and seen that he was wearing the tunic, it would have signaled that there was something special about him and they would treat him differently from the way they would have treated a regular person. By saying, "**the pit was empty, without any water in it,**" Moses was indicating that the season and weather were such that the absence of drinkable water would have become more deadly the longer Joseph stayed in the pit.

Joseph's Sale

Genesis 37:25 Then they sat down to eat a meal. And as they raised their eyes and looked, behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites was coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing aromatic gum and balm and myrrh, on their way to bring *them* down to Egypt. ²⁶ And Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it for us to kill our brother and cover up his blood? ²⁷ " Come and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; for he is our brother, our *own* flesh." And his brothers listened *to him*. ²⁸ Then some Midianite traders passed by, so they pulled *him* up and lifted Joseph out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty *shekels* of silver. Thus they brought Joseph into Egypt.

Evidently, Joseph joined his brothers about mealtime. With him in the pit, the brothers turned their attention to the meal. As they were eating, an opportunity arose for their disposal of Joseph without harming him.

Ishmaelites and Midianites were two different family tribes, yet they were related to each other and to Jacob. Ishmaelites were the descendants of Ishmael, Jacob's uncle, the half-brother of Isaac. Ishmael was 14 years older than Isaac. At this time in the story, Ishmael had been dead for about 45 years and Isaac was about 167 years old. We are not sure how large Ishmael's tribe had become by this time in the story; however, he did have twelve sons who were the heads of their own families living in their own villages. These Ishmaelites were most likely grandsons of Ishmael, second cousins of Jacob. The Midianites were descendants of Midian who was the fourth son of Abraham by Keturah as recorded in Genesis 25:2 and 1 Chronicles 1:32. Before Abraham died, he gave a large gift to all of his sons and sent them to the east to establish their tribes; therefore, Isaac would inherit the bulk of Abraham's wealth at his death. Midian became the head of the Midianite tribe that settled south of Moab on the east side of the Seir mountain range. Therefore, these Midianites would have been the grandsons of Midian and therefore the second cousins of Jacob. This whole transaction with Joseph was among extended family members.

The Ishmaelites were the first in the caravan to come to the pit followed by their cousins the Midianites. Caravans moved in large groups for protection. They were moving large quantities of expensive goods and in this case, they were on their way to deliver their products to Egypt. Both the Ishmaelites and the Midianites participated in the purchase of Joseph as a slave for 20 shekels of silver. Split among the nine brothers present, each received a little more than two shekels for the sale of Joseph.

In this passage, we find the first sale of a human in the Bible. It could not have been the first in history or we could have expected more to have been discussed in the text. Joseph was sold as were many other humans before him.

Joseph's Tunic

Genesis 37:31 So they took Joseph's tunic, and slaughtered a male goat, and dipped the tunic in the blood; ³² and they sent the varicolored tunic and brought it to their father and said, "We found this; please examine *it* to *see* whether it is your son's tunic or not." ³³ Then he examined it and said, "It is my son's tunic. A wild beast has devoured him; Joseph has surely been torn to pieces!"

The sons were 60 miles from Jacob. The caravan with Joseph left them and traveled south to Egypt passing within 20 miles of Hebron. The journey home for the sons of Jacob must have been joyous for some and exhausting for at least one, Reuben.

They knew they could not have taken the tunic home unblemished; therefore, they contrived a way to make it look like Joseph have been dragged away by a beast. It is interesting that Moses does not indicate that Jacob inquired as to the whereabouts of the remains or bones of Joseph and where they had buried him. The tunic was the only evidence and the way they had constructed

the story, more questions remained unanswered than answered. Had they just brought the tunic home, would Jacob have established a search party and looked for Joseph until they all had died of exhaustion? Why did Jacob accept the bloody tunic as the end of Joseph's life? Even if Joseph had been torn to pieces, where were his remains?

Jacob's Grief

Genesis 37:34 So Jacob tore his clothes, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. ³⁵ Then all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. And he said, "Surely I will go down to Sheol in mourning for my son." So his father wept for him.

With Jacob's favorite son dead, his grief was extremely great! Think of him as being inconsolable – and rightly so. When Jacob said that he would “**go down to Sheol in the mourning for my son,**” he meant that he would go to his grave grieving the loss of Joseph.

Joseph's Sale in Egypt - Potiphar

Genesis 37:36 Meanwhile, the Midianites sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, Pharaoh's officer, the captain of the bodyguard.

It was about 110 miles or a 6 day journey from Dothan to Zoan (Tanis, Egypt) where Pharaoh's throne was located. Within a week after his sale to the Ishmaelites, Joseph was sold again to Pharaoh's captain of the bodyguards for some unknown sum. Notice that the Midianites sold him in this verse which indicates that the Ishmaelites and the Midianites were most likely equal partners in the transaction.

At seventeen years of age, 2259 years after the creation of Adam, Joseph had been sold into slavery in Egypt. The beginning of the prophecy to Abraham had started.

Genesis 15:13 And God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. ¹⁴ "But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve; and afterward they will come out with many possessions.

However, in the Book of Exodus, Moses will also say the following:

Exodus 12:40 Now the time that the sons of Israel lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years. ⁴¹ And it came about at the end of four hundred and thirty years, to the very day, that all the hosts of the LORD went out from the land of Egypt.

When all the years that the sons of Israel and their respective tribes spent in Egypt are added up, they total 430 years to the day. In this passage, Israel's first son had entered Egypt and the 430 years had begun.