

Joseph

When he returned from Haran at the age of 78, Jacob moved back into the family home in Hebron. Genesis chapters 37 and 39 to 50 go on to describe what happened to the sons of Jacob in relation to their younger brother Joseph.

Joseph was born before the end of Jacob's twenty year stay in Haran probably when his father was 77 years old—the 11th of Jacob's 12 sons. So when Joseph was aged 17 his father Jacob was about 94 years old, and his grandfather Isaac was about 154 years old. As a boy he accompanied Dan and Naphtali, the sons of Bilhah, and Gad and Asher, the sons of Zilpah who were five to seven years older than Joseph. Their work was to care for Jacob's flocks. They apparently misbehaved, and Joseph reported what they were doing to Jacob.

Jacob (renamed Israel) was guilty of excessive favoritism for Joseph who was conceived by his wife Rachel after many years of barrenness. He gave Joseph a special tunic (*passim* means reaching to the palms of the hands and soles of the feet. The translation "coat of many colors" is based on the Greek LXX translation). The robe would indicate he was not a mere shepherd who worked with his hands, but in a supervisory position. Naturally this additional mark of favoritism added to the jealous hatred of his elder brothers.

Dreams were a common way of gaining insight or receiving messages from God. Later we find Joseph interpreting the dreams of Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker, and a very important interpretation of a dream of Pharaoh himself. Joseph's dream about his brother was in fact fulfilled, but he was certainly unwise to tell it to his brothers.

He further enraged them by describing a second dream. The sun and moon and eleven stars seems to refer to Jacob, his wife, and eleven brothers. When Jacob heard the dream he interpreted the moon as Joseph's mother. Rachel had died on the way back from Haran, so Joseph must have been raised by Rachel's maid, Bilhah or by Leah and they would have arrived in Egypt with Jacob.

The two dreams gave another reason for his brothers to hate him. But Jacob took note of the dreams and "kept the matter in mind" awaiting their fulfillment (as Mary did with the dream she received, Luke 2:19, 51).

Jacob's sons were pasturing their flocks in the area of Shechem (50 miles, 80 km, due north of Hebron). This illustrates the big distances shepherds would move their flocks to find suitable pasture. So Jacob sent his seventeen year old son Joseph to bring back news of them.

When Joseph arrived near Shechem he heard that his brothers had moved their flocks 14 miles, 22 km, further north to the area of Dothan (modern Tel Dotha in the Jezreel valley). The brothers were a distant 65 miles, 104 km, away from their father Jacob, now aged 94. Joseph's favored status and his dreams were a constant irritation to them. So some of them (perhaps the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah) planned to kill Joseph, and tell their father that a wild animal had killed him.

But Jacob's firstborn son, Reuben overheard their plotting and he was able to divert the plan to murder Joseph by suggesting that he be thrown into a deep water-less hole (perhaps a dried up well). So the murderous brothers stripped him of his long-sleeved full

length robe and threw him in to the pit. Reuben seems to have left to find help to bring Joseph out.

As he was away, the brothers sat down to eat their lunch. They were obviously unconcerned by the distress and cries of their brother which they remembered many years later. Just then they saw a caravan of traders on their way down into Egypt. These traders were Midianites descended from Keturah. But by this time more and more Arab tribes had come under the leadership of the tribe of Ishmael, and the name Ishmaelite could refer to other Arab tribes.

At Judah's suggestion the brothers decided that they could profit by selling Joseph as a slave to the traders for twenty pieces of silver. So the Midianites were able to pull Joseph out of the hole, and they took him to a slave market in Egypt. In his speech Stephen commented "The patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him". But though God was with him the Psalmist pictured the pain involved. "Joseph was sold as a slave. His feet were hurt with fetters, his neck was put in a collar of iron" (Psalm 105:18).

When Reuben returned, he was very distressed that his brother had been taken away. What would he say to his father? He obviously regretted what had happened, and many years later he said "Did I not tell you not to wrong the boy? But you would not listen".

Joseph had disappeared but his long-sleeved robe was still in the brothers' possession. Reuben agreed that the only solution was to dip Joseph's robe in the blood of one of their goats, and join with them in pretending to their father that his son had been killed by a wild animal. When Jacob recognized the blood-stained robe, he mourned many days for his son and refused to be comforted. We can imagine his surprise and joy when he heard 23 years later that Joseph was not only alive but the Prime Minister of Egypt.

When people commit one sin, they try to conceal it with another; to hide theft and murder, with lying and false oaths. Joseph's brethren kept their own and one another's counsel for some time; but their villainy came to light at last. From the whole of this chapter we see with wonder the ways of God. God's designs are, by these means, ready for action. This event shall end in Israel's going down to Egypt; resulting in their deliverance by Moses; thus setting up the Jewish people, their tradition and culture; and eventually the news of God's love for all people.

In Joseph's history we see the anticipation of Christ. It is a history that displays the various workings of the human mind, both good and bad, and the singular providence of God in making use of them for fulfilling his purposes. Joseph represents a noble ideal of character, remarkable for his gentle-ness, faithfulness to duty, magnanimity and forgiving spirit so that he is often seen as an Old Testament Christ figure.