

GENESIS 37-42

JOSEPH'S DREAMS OF GREATNESS - 37

The opening verses make it clear that we are beginning a new chapter in the story of the first family of Israel. It is the story of Jacob's family, and in it, Joseph, the first born of Rachel, will play a dominant role. This dominance prefigures the fact that his two sons (Manasseh & Ephraim, who will appear later in the story), will play a dominant future role among the tribes of Israel.

Joseph and his brothers do not get along. Why? At least 3 reasons are given us: 1) his stories, based on his dreams; 2) Jacob's (or Israel's) favouritism toward him; and 3) the implication of his dreams, namely about his superiority. It seems that the pattern of Jacob upsetting the order of the birth-right himself, has come back to haunt him in Joseph's readiness to accept his favoured status even though he has a number of elder brothers. Accordingly, as events unfold, his brothers hatch a plot to be rid of him. Of all the brothers, Reuben stands out in that he convinces the rest not to kill Joseph, just throw him in a pit. His plan is to rescue him at a later point. Judah, on his part, convinces the brothers to sell Joseph off to slave traders rather than allow him to die.

Joseph is then sold in Egypt to an Egyptian official, to serve in his household. Jacob is told that his beloved son is dead, and for evidence he is given his blood-spattered gown. Jacob is having to suffer the consequences of a disordered and conflicted household. But God, as God is depicted in this story, has plans to work through in mysterious ways. Whether through strange dreams or unexpected events, the chosen family is going to be brought through to the other side with the promise of becoming a nation, fulfilled.

Also, please note how even as slavery, patriarchy, racism and hierarchy are so prevalent in this ancient world 3000 years ago, these stories also show God most vividly present when these structures are transgressed, when slaves are addressed by God and rise up like Hagar, when those not receiving the blessing of first born succeed and love beautifully, like Ishmael and Esau, who also transgress the boundaries of "pure race" ... The gospel is trying to break into these ancient stories and Joseph will definitely reflect this in that he is the youngest child (Benjamin is not yet born) and the least in the line of inheritance (he will have to make it himself, which means relying on God to strengthen him rather than a cultural system that's oppressive). Joseph's children (which will figure prominently in the leadership of the tribes of Israel) will be mixed race (Egyptian and Hebrew). More to come...

INTERLUDE - THE STORY OF JUDAH AND TAMAR - 38

This is a difficult chapter on several fronts. It is somewhat graphic in its depiction of sexual misbehaviour and strange actions. Judah settles somewhere further on from his brothers. The importance here is that it explains how in the future history of Israel, Judah (the southern kingdom) will be separated from Israel (the northern kingdom). Judah settles in territory which will one day belong to the tribe of Judah. As his firstborn dies, the law of levirate marriage requires his next eldest son to produce an heir, since his eldest has died childless. The younger siblings are less inclined to do this, and the consequences are death and turmoil. Judah himself gets entangled in this turmoil and ends up producing an heir for his son himself. Tamar is simply looking to her own interests in producing an heir, and Judah respects what has happened even though it is through deception. He accepts that he had not fulfilled his earlier promise to Tamar, and this is some payback from God through Tamar's deception. Judah's actions are far less severe than his older brothers in Shechem (Chap. 34).

Sadly, we see here a comparison of Judah's character to that of Joseph in the chapters that follow. Where Judah has no hesitation sleeping with women who are not his wife, Joseph has strong integrity of character and fidelity to God's law (even though such laws have not yet been explicitly stated. Joseph respects his integrity and therefore the integrity of the women around him be they noble or slave). Even though the risk is serious to Joseph's fate, he ends up blessed by God and vindicated in the position he will eventually hold in Egypt.

JOSEPH'S RISE TO POWER - 39-41

Joseph's rise to power is detailed in the next set of stories which include the betrayal of an unhappy woman, a compassionate jailor, and Joseph's remarkable, God-given ability to interpret dreams. In spite of Joseph's impeccable character and ability, however, the story does not mistake the course of events as anything but God shaped. Without God's miraculous working, Joseph would never survive or thrive as he does.

The right opportunity emerges and Joseph's patient waiting, without compromising his character or beliefs, pays off. Pharaoh is in desperate need of someone with Joseph's abilities. Joseph is summoned. To his credit, he makes it clear to Pharaoh that whatever gifts he has, it is God who has blessed him, and it is God who will communicate the truth through him to Pharaoh (41:16). Through his tribulations, Joseph may have learned something of humility compared to his youthful arrogance with his brothers early on.

Joseph's interpretation comes true and Pharaoh's trust in him pays off also. He rewards him richly with a top position in the Egyptian government, riches, a high-class spouse, and legislated respect by the populace. Joseph is also blessed by the birth of two sons who take after their father in being dutiful and responsible (unlike the sons of Judah),

and they are mixed race, which is remarkable as they will become incorporated into the 12 tribes of Israel. Joseph uses his new power and privilege responsibly and fairly. It doesn't get to his head, and this is predictable given that he is willing to pay any price rather than compromise his integrity or principle.

JOSEPH'S FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH HIS BROTHERS - 42

Joseph is now in a position of power over his brothers, as predicted in his dreams. He recognizes them but they do not recognize him. He is much older now (he is 30 years old now compared to 17 years old when he was sold off), dressed differently, and fluently Egyptian. He overhears them reckoning with what they had done to their brother long ago, and it brings him to tears (42:21ff). Tears are the antidote to vengeful rage or plotting bitterness. He also finds out there is another brother he has never met.

Joseph spares Reuben and binds the next oldest, Simeon, as a purported ransom, ensuring the brothers would return and bring their youngest brother too. He sends them home with provisions but returns their money to them. This causes them distress as they cannot understand Joseph's motives and fear, perhaps, they will be accused of theft. Back in Canaan, Jacob cannot understand what has happened either. But he is unwilling to take a chance in being parted with Benjamin. With Joseph gone, Benjamin is his last link with Rachel and his favourite. He is willing to leave Simeon's fate to the will of the Egyptians as the price of keeping Benjamin close to home. The problem is: the grain will run out again and the brothers will need to go back for some more. What will they do then?