

Joseph Dreams September 6, 2020

Dear friends, we start reading the Joseph story with today's lesson. This should be interesting! There's a lot going on here. When we think of how life seems to be broken in our day and time, we need do no more than look back on these patriarchal families, to see that humanity has been a mess for a long time!

That mess does not start with Joseph. It doesn't end with him either! Let's take a look at what was going on before we start reading Genesis 37. The story of the Hebrews, and Judaism, and Christianity, really starts with God's call to Abram, back in Chapter 12. You'll recall that Abram, later renamed Abraham, was faithful to God's call. God promised him a multitude of descendants. But as he and his wife Sarah approached (or were in) old age, not one of those descendants had shown up! Like humanity is wont to do, Abraham and Sarah resorted to "Plan B." Sarah's maid Hagar served as a surrogate mother to give Abraham a son, Ishmael. Then, Sarah in her old age indeed had her own child, Isaac! That made for a jolly family situation. For reasons that God knows, only one child would carry "the promise". By our Bible, that child is Isaac. The Moslems beg to differ on this, but that's peripheral to the Biblical narrative. Well, not "beg," they "insist," that Ishmael carried the promise.

Isaac and his wife Rebecca had two sons. The only instance of a "normal" family we have among the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Jacob and his brother Esau were fraternal twins, with Esau happening to be born first. But they were rivals rather than sharing brotherly love. Worse, Esau was the favorite of his father, Jacob was the favorite of his mother. Esau was the rugged outdoorsman, Jacob was the clever homeboy. After Jacob cheated his brother out of his father's blessing, he got out of town (well, the family tents) in a hurry so his brother Esau wouldn't kill him. Esau would have, too. After all, there was no "Law." This was how family matters were settled in the absence of a reigning patriarch. Jacob found safety as a servant of his mother's brother, Laban.

This really is where the story of Joseph starts. Did you think these wandering nomads of the scrublands lived a gentle, peaceful life, close to nature, and filled with an awareness of the transcendental? Not exactly! Even that "simple" life was full of trickery, bait and switch schemes, conniving, and rivalry. I expect you know the story. Jacob falls in love with Laban's daughter Rachel. He agrees to work as a servant (comparable to the indentured servants of the colonial era) for seven years for Rachel. Seven years, done! A big wedding. Of course the bride is carefully adorned, wearing a veil – to keep her beauty only for her husband. The wedding is done. And then, and only then, Jacob discovered that he isn't married to Rachel, he is married to Leah! Rachel's older sister.

Of course, he was outraged, but Laban explained to him, after the fact, not before, that the older girl must be married first. Seven years, and that never got mentioned. Were the two daughters part of this conspiracy? Likely; how could they not be? But they were under the power of their father Laban; women in that time didn't have choices. Laban was sympathetic, though. He offered Jacob a deal: seven more years and he could have Rachel, too, and can have her now. Jacob agreed.

You can imagine how all this seemed from Leah's and Rachel's point of view. Leah was unwanted. She is described as having either "dim eyes" or "lovely eyes", the translation is uncertain. But either way, she had a problem. Even if "lovely eyes," what's the matter? Jacob didn't care about Leah; he loved her sister Rachel only! Rachel knew it, and took advantage. Yet, we can read further and see that in the years that followed, only Leah, not Rachel, had children. In succession she bore four sons, Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah. In that day and age, this was a very serious matter of standing! Rachel, not content with having just her claim on Jacob's affection, gave Jacob her maid Bilhah, as Sarah had given her maid to Abraham earlier, as a surrogate. That gave Rachel two sons, sort of: Dan and Naphtali. Leah hadn't had more children, so she gave Jacob her maid Zilpah. Hence, Gad and Asher were born.

Chapter 30 verses 14-21 gives us an illuminating story that illustrates the family dynamics. The oldest son, Leah's boy Reuben, found some mandrakes. These were believed to aid fertility. Rachel found out about this, and made a deal with Leah. She would let Leah have Jacob for a night in exchange for the mandrakes. As a result, Leah had a fifth son (not counting those born by Bilhah), Issachar. Then later another son, Zebulun and a daughter Dinah.

All this was occurring (presumably) over the seven years after the two girls were given to Jacob and he continued to work as a servant to Laban. That would be seven children in seven years for Leah, which seems a bit much. I suspect the timeline has some folds in it. This all gets us to Genesis 30:22 **Then God remembered Rachel, and God heeded her and opened her womb. 23 She conceived and bore a son, and said, "God has taken away my reproach"; 24 and she named him Joseph, saying, "May the LORD add to me another son!"**

At this point in the story, Jacob asked release from Laban. He had served the seven extra years for Rachel. But Laban made him another deal. If he continued, he could have all the speckled and spotted goats, and black sheep, that shall be born in the flock. But first Laban, always the clever one, took out all the current speckled and spotted goats and black sheep, and put them in the portion of his flock that was controlled by his own sons. These people may have lived three or four millennia ago, but Laban understood breeding. Apparently Jacob did too. He instituted a breeding program that produced an abundance of speckled and spotted goats, and black sheep. After a while, he was rich, as measured by size of flocks. Laban's sons were not too

happy about that, as things had not worked out the way they were supposed to. Time for Jacob to run away again. While Laban was away at a sheep shearing, Jacob cleared out along with wives, children and flocks, heading back to Canaan as fast as they could go.

Laban pursued, and caught up with Jacob in Gilead, east of the Jordan River. There was an interesting conversation that we won't get into, but Laban and Jacob eventually agreed to a treaty. A pile of stones named "Mizpah" was a witness before God that they would not intrude on each other's territory, and Jacob would not ill-treat Laban's daughters. Whew! Jacob had finally escaped Laban!

But guess who was waiting for him up ahead? Dear brother Esau! He got word that Esau was coming to meet him with four hundred men. You don't normally need that many for a welcoming committee. So Jacob arranged his company with gifts for Esau in front, flocks and women and children ahead (Leah's in front of Rachel's of course), and himself last. That way, if Esau was hostile he could run while Esau was taking charge of the rest, and maybe some others would escape too. Jacob was an expert escape artist by now! But something happened during the night. He wrestled with an angel, or perhaps it was God. In the morning, the angel blessed him with a new name, Israel, but also threw his hip out of joint. You can't run with a dislocated hip!

The meeting with Esau turned out to be peaceful. After all, Esau had done alright. Esau may have sold his birthright when they were young, but when Jacob ran off to Laban, he abandoned everything to Esau, so Esau actually inherited everything, even Jacob's share. By now Esau was well established as the ruler of the Mount Seir region, Edom. His descendants were the Edomites. Esau invited Jacob to go back with him to Seir. Jacob replied that he'd follow along. Instead, he went the opposite way and across the Jordan River, and came to the area of Shechem, in Canaan.

Things did not go well in Shechem either (Chapter 34). So Jacob had to pull up stakes and move again, this time to the Bethel area. It was there that Rachel died in childbirth, giving Jacob/Israel his twelfth son, Benjamin. From there we go forward several years to when Joseph is still young. Benjamin would be still younger. If we take the chronology literally, Reuben (the oldest) would be about 14 years older than Joseph, which might put him at about 30 or so.

So, let's review the family situation: There are the four eldest brothers, all Leah's sons: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. You might think Reuben, the eldest, should be the favorite son. But he had dishonored himself (see 35:22). Simeon and Levi have also brought dishonor and shame to Jacob (see Chapter 34). That made Judah the most senior son in good standing. These four would have been old enough to take a leadership position among the sons. Next are the four sons of the two maids, Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher. While in theory these were sons of Rachel and Leah,

in practice it didn't work that way; they were second class sons. Just as when Isaac was born to Sarah, Ishmael and Hagar became expendable. Then there were two final sons born to Leah, Issachar and Zebulun, who would have not been much older than Joseph. Then Joseph, and finally Benjamin, Rachel's sons.

So as we get to Chapter 37, Joseph is growing up, and finding his place in the family. At 17, he helped herd the flocks along with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah. That would be Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher. They'd be in their 20's, but Joseph calculates that because he's a son of one of the wives, not just one of the maids, he has a higher standing. Indeed, he is his father's favorite as his mother was Jacob's dear love Rachel. He "tattles" on these brothers, bringing a "bad report" back to Jacob. So, what happens? Jacob shows everybody who is important, as if to clear up any doubts. As the lesson book explains, there's ambiguity about the particulars of the coat. I think "coat of many colors" conveys the sense of it better. After all, what coat doesn't have sleeves? That's part of the definition of a coat. Without the sleeves it would be a vest. This is a special coat. An extraordinary coat. A royal garment. Reserved expressly for he who was the Favorite Son: Joseph.

Joseph understands what this means. He tells his brothers, presumably all of them, not just the four second class ones, about his dream. Their sheaves bow down to his. It's pretty clear what that he is telling them, and they are not pleased. Joseph might have had this dream, but was it wise to taunt his siblings? He likely calculated that it didn't matter; he was Jacob's favorite. Then, he has another dream. This time, not only do the eleven stars representing his brothers bow down to him, but also the sun and the moon, representing Jacob himself either Leah, the remaining first class wife, or Rachel, Joseph's mother. This even annoyed Jacob. (Jacob asks if Joseph thinks he is better than him and "your mother." But, by this time in the narrative Rachel had died in childbirth of Benjamin.) Notice the mention of grain and sheaves. Jacob seems to be not just a wandering nomad anymore. It seems he has settled down and his family has become farmers, at least to some extent.

I think it's necessary to recognize that Joseph isn't stupid. He's struggling to find his proper place in a complicated family. He's young, and he's foolish, but he's not stupid. He certainly dreams big, and as we will see that these dreams do mean something. He is overconfident. He thinks his status with his father will always protect him.

At the same time, favoritism is entrenched in the family's history and culture. There has always been only one "child of promise" in each generation: Isaac, then Jacob, and now Joseph. He is not an illogical candidate, given the disqualifications of Reuben, Simeon and Levi. Judah still has the superior claim for favor as older, but Joseph is of the favored wife. Do you think the brothers talked about this kind of thing

within the family? I would guess they did. Not in front of Jacob, but whispers among themselves. But as long as Jacob was in control, things would remain unresolved. Then opportunity came.

The story of Joseph comes to us from two distinct ancient sources. Scholars have analyzed the text of Genesis and discerned three primary threads on the basis of language usage, names used for God, and other particulars. The “J” thread, so named because of the use of JHWH as the name of God, is associated with Judah. When the “tetragrammaton” is used in the Old Testament Hebrew, it is translated into English as, “The LORD” in most translations. The “E” source uses the Hebrew “Elohim” for the name of God. Its source seems to be the northern tribes of Israel. These are woven together in the Joseph story and in much of the rest of the Old Testament up to the time of David and Solomon, maybe further. There is also a “P,” or “Priestly” source, that is very concerned with the law, dates, numbers, genealogy, and records in general. It was during the exile that these sources and some others were collected together into what we now have as the Pentateuch and other scriptures.

So as we read about what happens, we hear the “E” (northern) source mention how Reuben planned to preserve Joseph’s life. The “J” source highlights how Judah saved Joseph by having him sold to be a slave rather than being left to die in the pit. Earlier, the J source has the moon represent Joseph’s mother, but according to E she had already died in childbirth. The E source has Joseph sold to Midianites. For J it was Ishmaelites. The interweaving of these threads explains the differences in some details of the Joseph story. They are in overall agreement about what is happening. There is some possibility that Rachel was still alive and Benjamin was born after Joseph was sold by his brothers.

So, even though there may be some uncertainty over details, it’s pretty clear that the older four brothers were the primary conspirators. Joseph wasn’t just a political danger; he was very annoying and overconfident that his favorite status would let him prevail over them. Only Reuben and Judah have specific words mentioned. Simeon and Levi had already demonstrated their willingness to shed blood. Where the family leadership might land was still a matter of doubt, but all four of the elder brothers would agree that Joseph was a problem.

Really, to this point the story just reflects the broken nature of humanity. Even within this family there is no unity, a lack of mutual brotherly love, and messy questions of succession and privilege. What can God do with such people? How on Earth could he choose Jacob as his patriarch, or Joseph? Even Abraham had his problems. Isaac seemed to exercise a passive role most of the time, at least from the Bible’s perspective. These are the People of God through whom he will bless the whole Creation?

We’ll see where this story takes us. To be continued...