

Genesis Chapter 37 Continued

Genesis 37:25 "And they sat down to eat bread: and they lifted up their eyes and looked, and, behold, a company of Ishmaelites came from Gilead with their camels bearing spicery and balm and myrrh, going to carry [it] down to Egypt."

"And they sat down to eat bread": Not at all concerned at what they had done, nor in the least grieved for the affliction of Joseph, and without any pity and compassion for him in his distress, but joyful and glad they had got him into their hands, and to get rid of him forever.

"And they lifted up their eyes, and looked": After they had eaten their food, or while they were eating it.

"And, behold, a company of Ishmaelites came from Gilead": A place of merchandise for spices and balm, and such like things mentioned. The Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan call them Arabians; and the Targum of Jerusalem, Saracens.

These were the posterity of Ishmael and were travelling to Egypt with it, and their way there lay by Dothan. These travelled in companies, now called "caravans", partly on the account of robbers, and partly by reason of wild beasts, with both which they were sometimes beset in the deserts through which they travelled.

"Ishmaelites": Also known as Midianites (verses 28, 36, 39:1). The descendants of Ishmael and of Abraham through Keturah and Midian (25:1-2), were sufficiently intermarried or were such ingrained as travelers and traders, that they were viewed as similar groups. These were coming west from Gilead (see note on 31:21).

"With their camels bearing spicery, and balm, and myrrh": The first word is general according to our version and others, and signifies various spices, a collection of them. In the times of Solomon; and what we render "myrrh", is in the Hebrew called "lot", and is by some thought to be the same as a narcotic painkiller.

Their merchandise was carried on camels, very fit for their purpose, as they were strong creatures made to carry burdens, and could travel many days without water, which they were sometimes obliged to do in the deserts.

"Going to carry it down to Egypt": Where these things didn't grow, and were much in use, at least some of them, both in medicines, and in embalming dead bodies, much practiced in Egypt.

These Ishmaelites were descendants from Ishmael. These Arab traders were selling to the Pharaohs of Egypt. Gilead to Egypt was a known trade route. This spicery and myrrh were sweet smelling perfumes. The balm was for healing, and was made from trees in the Gilead area.

Genesis 37:26 "And Judah said unto his brethren, What profit [is it] if we slay our brother, and conceal his blood?"

And Judah said unto his brethren": In sight of the Ishmaelites, a thought came into his mind to get Joseph sold to them.

"What profit is it if we slay our brother, and conceal his blood?" It could be no advantage to them even if they could have concealed his blood from men. And if it was discovered, as it would, in all likelihood, by one means or another, then they must be answerable for it.

And if not, God would take vengeance on them, from whom they could never conceal it; and therefore, it would be most profitable and advantageous to them to sell him, and not destroy him, or take away his life. And to suffer him to lie in the pit and die was the same thing.

Judah, the fourth son of Jacob and Leah, spoke against killing Joseph. Reuben was also, Leah's son. It seems the only ones who really wanted to kill Joseph were handmaids' sons. Not only would they not profit from his death, but if found out, they would be in worse trouble.

Genesis 37:27 "Come, and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him; for he [is] our brother [and] our flesh. And his brethren were content."

"Come, and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites": For a slave, and that will defeat his dream. As these were going down to Egypt, where they would sell him, he would be far enough from them, and there would be no probability of his ever being lord over them.

"And let not our hand be upon him": To take away his life, either by stabbing or starving him.

"For he is our brother, and our flesh": They had all one father, though different mothers, and therefore, as the relation was so near, some sympathy and compassion should be shown, at least some degree of tenderness and not savageness and cruelty.

"And his brethren were content": they agreed to the motion, inasmuch as they supposed it would answer their end as well, which was to prevent his dominion over them.

They just wanted to be rid of him. They did not care how. This plan they agreed on would put extra money in their pockets, and get rid of him, too.

Genesis 37:28 "Then there passed by Midianites merchantmen; and they drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty [pieces] of silver: and they brought Joseph into Egypt."

"Ishmaelites" and "Midianites" are terms used interchangeably (in verse 28; just as in Judges 8:22 and 24). Ishmaelite may not be an ethnic term, as used here, but is simply a reference to nomadic merchants.

"Twenty pieces of silver": This was the average price of a slave at that time in the second millennium B.C. Although most slaves were part of the booty of military conquest, private and commercial slave-trading was also common. Joseph was sold into slavery ca. 1897 B.C.

It is not likely that Joseph was Sold ... into Egypt" during the Hyksos period (1730-1570 B.C.), but rather prior to it late in the reign of Sesostris II, and eventually served under Sesostris III in the Middle Kingdom during the Twelfth Dynasty (1878-1843 B.C.). This is most compatible with (1 Kings 6:1 and Exodus 12:40).

His brothers lifted Joseph out. They were pleased with the price, and certainly were glad to be rid of Joseph.

Genesis 37:29 "And Reuben returned unto the pit; and, behold, Joseph [was] not in the pit; and he rent his clothes."

"Reuben ... rent his clothes": Although he was absent at the time of the sale, he would be held responsible for the treachery, and so joined in the cover-up (verses 30-35). His grief manifested how much he had actually wanted to rescue Joseph (see 42:22).

Reuben had no intentions of killing Joseph. He rent his clothes because he thought his brothers had killed Joseph.

Genesis 37:30 "And he returned unto his brethren, and said, The child [is] not; and I, whither shall I go?"

"And he returned unto his brethren": From the pit, and whom he suspected had took him and killed him, as was their first design, not being with them when they proposed to sell him, and did.

"And said, the child is not": Not in the pit, nor in the land of the living, but is dead, which is sometimes the meaning of the phrase (Jeremiah 31:15). He calls him a child, though seventeen years of age, because the youngest brother but one, and he himself was the eldest, and also because of his tender concern for him.

"And I, whither shall I go?" To find the child or flee from his father's face, which he could not think of seeing any more. Whom he had highly offended already in the case of Bilhah, and now he would be yet more incensed against him for his neglect of Joseph, who, he might have expected, would have taken particular care of him, being the eldest son.

He speaks like one in the utmost perplexity, not knowing what to do, what course to steer, being almost distracted and at his wits' end.

Reuben knew that he should have stopped this long before it got out of hand. How could he face his father?

Verses 31-35: The deceiver of Isaac (27:18-29), was deceived by his own sons' lie. Sin's punishment is often long delayed.

Genesis 37:31 "And they took Joseph's coat, and killed a kid of the goats, and dipped the coat in the blood;"

"And they took Joseph's coat": After they had told Reuben what they had done with him, who being willing to make the best of things as it was, joined with them in the following scheme. By this it appears, that when they took Joseph out of the pit they did not put his coat on him, but sold him naked, or almost so, to the merchants.

"And killed a kid of the goats, and dipped the coat in the blood": That being, as the Targum of Jonathan and Jarchi observe, most like to human blood.

Genesis 37:32 "And they sent the coat of [many] colors, and they brought [it] to their father; and said, This have we found: know now whether it [be] thy son's coat or no."

"And they sent the coat of many colors": Which was what they dipped in the blood of the kid. This they sent to Jacob in such a condition, by the hand of some messenger. The Targum of Jonathan says the sons of Zilpah and Bilhah. But more probably some of their servants, whom they instructed what to say to their father when they presented it to him.

Not caring to appear in person at first, lest they be thrown into such commotion and confusion at their father's distress, as might tend to lead on to a discovery of the whole affair.

"And they brought it to their father, and said, this we have found": That is, the messengers carried to the father of Joseph's brethren, who were sent with it, and taught to say, that they found it in some field in this condition, but found no man near it. Only that by itself, and suspected it might be the coat of his son Joseph, if he had sent him out in it.

"Know now whether it be thy son's coat or no": Look upon it, see if any marks can be observed in it, by which it may with any certainty be known whether it is his or not.

To lie to their father was a bad sin, but to grieve him by telling him that his favorite son had been killed was cruel beyond reason. Their deception did not speak well of their character.

The Scripture was not explicit about whether all of the sons were involved or not, but we know the handmaids' sons were herding before, and two of Leah's sons were mentioned specifically.

Genesis 37:33 "And he knew it, and said, [It is] my son's coat; an evil beast hath devoured him; Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces."

"And he knew it, and said, it is my son's coat": He took it, and examined it, and was soon convinced, and well assured it was his son's coat.

Read the words without the supplement "it is", and the meaning will appear the more, "my son's coat!" Think with what a beating heart, what trembling limbs, what wringing of hands, what flowing eyes, and faltering speech, he spoke these words, and what followed.

"An evil beast hath devoured him": This was natural to conclude from the condition the coat was in, and from the country he was sent into, which abounded with wild beasts. And was the very thing Joseph's brethren contrived to say themselves. It was in this view they wished and hoped the affair would be considered, and so their wickedness concealed.

"Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces": Or he is most certainly rent in pieces, there is no question to be made of it; it is plain, and it must be the case.

Genesis 37:34 "And Jacob rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days."

"And Jacob rent his clothes": As expressive of his grief and mourning for the death of his son, as he supposed.

"And put sackcloth upon his loins": Put off his usual apparel, and put on a coarse garment on his loins next to his flesh, as another token of his great trouble and affliction for the loss of his son. Which though afterwards was frequently done in times of public or private mourning, yet this is the first time we read of it.

Whether Jacob was the first that used it, whom his posterity and others imitated, is not certain. However it appears that this usage, as well as that of rending clothes on sorrowful occasions, were very ancient.

"And mourned for his son many days": Or years, as days sometimes signify; twenty two years, according to Jarchi, even until the time he went down to Egypt and saw him alive.

This was about the cruelest thing the sons could do to their father. To be killed would be bad, but to believe that a wild animal had torn your son to pieces would bring greater pain. There was not even a body to bury.

They say this is the worst kind of grief. When you bury someone, it makes it final; but when there is no body, the grief goes on and on. These sons could not have possibly loved their father very much, or they would not have let him suffer like this.

Genesis 37:35 "And all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted; and he said, For I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning. Thus his father wept for him."

"Grave (meaning Sheol)": This is the first Old Testament use of this term (Sheol), for the abode of the dead (in 35:20 the word "grave is used to refer to an earthly burial plot). It is a general Hebrew term meaning the place of the dead (used 65 times in the Old Testament), referring to either the body in its decaying form or the soul in its conscious afterlife.

Here was the first mention of daughters of Israel, except for Dinah. Daughters can usually help their fathers, but Israel was so grieved no one could comfort him. This was the love of his life.

He was an old man, around one hundred and eighty years old. This might even grieve him to death.

Genesis 37:36 "And the Midianites sold him into Egypt unto Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh's, [and] captain of the guard."

“Potiphar”: He was a prominent court official and high-ranking officer in Egypt, perhaps captain of the royal bodyguard (40:3-4). His name, a most unusual grammatical form for that period, either meant “The one whom Ra [the sun-god] Has Given” or “the one who is placed on earth by Ra,” making it a descriptive epithet more than a person’s name.

The term translated “officer” is elsewhere translated “eunuch” (Dan. 1:3). Historically, the word followed the same shift of meaning in Hebrew as in Akkadian, from “Official Courtier” to the more restricted meaning of “Eunuch.”

Note (in 39:7), that Potiphar was married. Here, the earlier meaning of “Official” is best. As for the second term, rather than literal Hebrew understanding, “chief executioner,” the usual rendering “captain of the guard” is best, since he as a prison keeper (40:1-4).

There are so many things that make us think of Jesus in all of this. Jesus was sold by his brethren for thirty pieces of silver. Joseph was sold by his brethren for twenty pieces of silver.

Jesus was taken before Pilate, a high official of the land. Joseph was taken to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh. Joseph was a type and a shadow of Jesus. Be sure to watch for more things that remind you of Jesus. This young boy, the favorite of his father, had been forcibly taken from his father to a strange land.

The Scriptures do not elaborate on what Joseph had to say about all this. It seems as though he stood before them as one who was dumb.

The Midianites were descendants of Medan, a brother of Midian, who were both sons of Abraham by Keturah. They were Joseph's kinsman. The Ishmaelites and the Midianites were fellow traders. Both groups were involved in this crime against Joseph.

"Potiphar" means he who belongs to the sun.

The captain of the guard was in charge of executions. He was keeper of the state prison.

Let us look back just a little at this situation, and note a few things. The brothers were very jealous of him, thus causing them to hate him. Their reason for selling him, or killing him had lowered their moral status.

They were no better than the society around them, and they were supposed to be God's representatives here on the earth. Their blessings of their great-grandfather, grandfather, and father had fallen on them.

Wicked men and God seem to be at cross purposes. God will always triumph, as we will see when this unfolds further. God can take something as terrible as this and make something good out of it.

Genesis Chapter 37 Continued Questions

1. As Joseph's brothers were eating bread. What did they see?
2. What were the camels bearing?
3. Who were these Ishmeelites?
4. Where were they from?
5. What was the balm used for?
6. Who suggested that they profit from Joseph?
7. Who were Reuben and his brother?
8. Why did they not kill him?
9. Who took Joseph out of the pit?
10. What was the price they sold him for?
11. What was the price of a slave?
12. Who rent his clothes when he came to the pit to release Joseph, and he was not there?
13. What did the brothers do with his coat?
14. What lie did they tell about the coat?
15. What question did they ask their father?
16. What two terrible sins did these sons do against their father?
17. What did the father assume when he saw the coat?
18. How did the father show his grief?
19. In what verse were daughters mentioned?
20. About how old was Israel when this happened?
21. Who was Joseph sold to?

22. What position in government did he have?
23. How much was Jesus sold for?
24. Joseph was a type and shadow of whom?
25. Who were the Midianites?
26. What does "Potiphar" mean?
27. The captain of the guard was in charge of what?
28. Do you believe God had anything to do with this?