

Genesis 37-39 Joseph is sold into slavery

Chapter 37

The family story has passed from Jacob's generation to the generation of his sons. Jacob settled in the land that God had promised to his father and his father's father. Now Jacob is an older man and his favorite son is coming into adulthood (17). Because of this favoritism (and perhaps because of Joseph's attitude about being the favorite) his brothers hated him. Jacob made a long robe with long sleeves (a coat of many colors in some older translations). One could not properly work manual labor (like being a shepherd in the field) while wearing such a coat, so this gift suggests Jacob's expectation that Joseph will continue to lead a life of leisure while his brothers do all the hard work. Joseph has two dreams, both of which seem to indicate that his brothers will bow down to him (not a dream that one would normally share, unless one was trying to annoy one's brothers). Jacob, however, took these dreams into consideration. He sent Joseph to check up on his brothers, and he found them not where they said they'd be. While Joseph was still far off, his brothers began plotting his MURDER! This is deep hatred. Reuben and Judah, however, both seek to profit off this dynamic. Reuben sought to dissuade them so that he could save his brother and be elevated in their father's eyes, so he convinced them to only throw him in the pit instead. Even being thrown in the pit is dangerous, for he has no water. While Reuben is away, Judah convinces them to sell Joseph to the Midianite/Ishmaelite traders to profit financially and make Joseph "as good as dead to them." This is ironic, for the Midianites and Ishmaelites were the descendants of the children Abraham had with his enslaved concubines, so the ones who once were slaves have now enslaved the child of Abraham. The brothers soak Joseph's coat in goat blood and Jacob jumps to his own conclusions about what must have happened to his favorite son, vowing to go to his grave still mourning.

Chapter 38

Chapter 38 takes a detour from the Joseph narrative to tell the story of Judah and Tamar. Judah is Joseph's elder brother, and his eldest son is described as evil and dies early. His wife Tamar is given in Levirate marriage to his younger brother Onan in order for Onan to sire children with his brother's wife, in his brother's name, but Onan instead takes advantage of the situation. The Levirate marriage was a kind of ancient fertility custom. If the only reason Tamar was having sex with Onan was to sire children in her dead husband's name, and Onan spilled his seed on the ground every time so as to make that impossible, then what Onan did to Tamar would constitute rape. As a result of this wickedness, the scripture says that Onan also dies early. Now Judah is thinking that it's the association with Tamar that has killed his sons and not their own wickedness, so he really doesn't want to lose his last remaining son, but promises Tamar he will give her that son also in marriage when he comes of age (with no actual intention of following through with this responsibility). Tamar dutifully returns to her father's house to live as a chaste widow until the time of her next marriage comes. But, then she sees that Shelah had come of age and had still not been offered to her in marriage, so Tamar takes matters into her own hands and seeks to sire

a child by Judah himself in honor of her deceased husband. She dresses as a Temple (fertility) prostitute, which would have been an honorable profession at this time for Gentiles, and since Judah's time of mourning for his wife was over and since he was now a bachelor, he requests to have sex with Tamar (assuming her to be a temple prostitute). Tamar wisely asks for his pledge that he will pay what he owes her for the experience, and he gives her his signet ring, cord, and staff. Each of these items would have contained family/person specific emblems on them. This was the ancient equivalent of leaving a credit card and driver's license as a guarantee. Later, Judah's friend tried to bring what he owed her and couldn't find her, so Judah decides to just drop the matter in case others would find out and laugh at him. But, then he hears that Tamar is pregnant and brings her out to have her killed for adultery, only for her to make known that the child is his and his alone. Tamar got the children who were owed her, and Judah declared that she was more righteous than he. She gave birth to twins, and Perez became the ancestor of King David, and thus of Jesus.

Chapter 39

Joseph is bought in Egypt by Potiphar, the captain of the Roman guard. "The Lord was with Joseph" is the theme of the Joseph cycle. He ends up in truly unfortunate circumstances through no fault of his own (enslaved, imprisoned), and yet every step of the way the Lord is with him and makes him prosper even in adversity. Because the Lord was with Joseph, Potiphar prospers, and soon connects that his own good fortune started when he took on Joseph, so he elevates Joseph to the highest status possible for a slave. Joseph oversees the finances, the house, the business; the only thing Joseph is not allowed is Potiphar's wife. However, Potiphar's wife has her eyes on Joseph and continuously tries to seduce him. Joseph is faithful to God and to Potiphar and refuses her advances repeatedly. When she catches him alone, she becomes more forceful in her advances, grabbing hold of his garment. He runs away, but she is left with the garment. She then tells the other slaves and Potiphar himself that Joseph tried to rape her, that he left the garment beside her while he was disrobing, and that it's all Potiphar's fault this happened for bringing a Hebrew into their house! Potiphar is of course enraged by this accusation and sends Joseph to prison where the worst criminals are kept (the king's prisoners). But even here, "The Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love." Joseph was shown mercy and kindness by the chief jailor and thrived even in prison!