

The Book of Genesis

Chapter 37

37:1 Now Jacob dwelt in the land where his father was a stranger, in the land of Canaan.

"Dwelt in the Land"

Since Isaac preferred living in the area of Beer Lahai Roi (25:11), it seems likely that was also the location where Jacob settled.

37:2 This is the account of Jacob [REB: "and this is an account of Jacob's descendants"]. ***Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them*** [1708 B.C.]. (NIV)

Concubines to Wives

In 35:22 Bilhah was still considered a concubine. Now she and Zilpah both have the status of being wives of Jacob. Due to Jacob's promise to Laban that he would not take any other wives while married to his daughters (31:50), it is probable that Leah was now dead. This made it possible for him to elevate the mothers of four of his sons to the status of wives.

This is the beginning of the account of the circumstances that placed the nation of Jacob or Israel in Egypt.

37:3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe [NKJ: "tunic of many colors"; TAN: "an ornamented tunic"; REB: "long robe with sleeves"] ***for him.*** (NIV)

Coat of Many Colors

The meaning of the Hebrew [*ketonet passim*] is literally "a coat that extends to the hands and feet;" the only other occurrence of this term is found in 2SA 13:18.

Jewish tradition states that this coat was a symbol of being chosen for leadership. This was similar to the tradition regarding the "garment of skins" given to Adam, which according to tradition was passed down even to Esau (27:15).

37:4 When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him. (NIV)

Favoritism

Favoritism has divided children, families, and nations.

37:5-10 Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly [symbolized how quickly Joseph rose out of obscurity in Egypt] ***my sheaf rose and stood upright*** [referred to Joseph's rule extending for a long time], ***while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it.***" ***His brothers said to him, "Do you intend to***

reign over us? Will you actually rule us?" And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said. Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. "Listen," he said, "I had another dream, and this time the sun [Israel] and moon [Rachel] and eleven stars [Joseph's brothers] were bowing down to me." When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, "What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?" (NIV)

Sun, Moon, Eleven Stars

John used these same symbols in REV 12:1. Jacob indicated it would be impossible for the dream to literally be fulfilled in their present circumstances since Rachel was already dead.

37:11 His brothers were jealous of him, but his father did not forget the incident. (REB)

37:12 Now his brothers had gone to graze their father's flocks near Shechem, (NIV)

Shechem

This "Shechem" may have been on the same land that Jacob had bought about 10 years earlier, located almost 60 miles from the area where Jacob was living close to his father Isaac.

37:13-15 and Israel said to Joseph, "As you know, your brothers are grazing the flocks near Shechem. Come, I am going to send you to them." "Very well," he replied. So he said to him, "Go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flocks, and bring word back to me." Then he sent him off from the Valley of Hebron. When Joseph arrived at Shechem, a man found him wandering around in the fields and asked him, "What are you looking for?" (NIV)

Joseph's Authority

If all Jacob wanted was a report on the condition of his flocks he could have sent a servant. However, since the other sons had not always proven trustworthy (vs 2), Jacob gave Joseph the authority to correct any problem he might find.

37:16-20 He replied, "I'm looking for my brothers. Can you tell me where they are grazing their flocks?" "They have moved on from here," the man answered. "I heard them say, 'Let's go to Dothan ["two wells", located approximately 8 miles from Shechem].'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him. "Here comes that dreamer!" they said to each other. "Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams." (NIV)

Irony

The irony of his brothers' attempt to destroy him was that their scheming would eventually help in the fulfillment Joseph's dreams.

37:21-22 When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. "Let's not take his life," he said. "Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the desert, but don't lay a hand on him." Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father. (NIV)

Reuben

As firstborn, Reuben was held responsible for all his brothers' actions.

37:23-28 *So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe—the richly ornamented robe he was wearing—and they took him and threw him into the cistern. Now the cistern was empty; there was no water in it. As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt. Judah said to his brothers, "What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood." His brothers agreed. So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.* (NIV)

Caravan

It was the Midianites who bought Joseph as a slave. The Ishmaelites had apparently been hired to transport the goods of the Midianite merchants.

37:29 *When Reuben returned to the cistern and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes.* (NIV)

37:30-32 *Returning to his brothers, he said, "The boy is gone! Now, what am I to do?" Then they got Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. They took the ornamented robe back to their father and said, "We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe."* (TAN)

37:33-35 *He recognized it and said, "It is my son's robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces." Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "No," he said, "in mourning will I go down to the grave to my son." So his father wept for him.* (NIV)

Jacob's Daughters

The only daughter ever mentioned by name was Dinah. The use of the plural "*daughters*" has three possible explanations. (1) The term "daughter" can refer to a granddaughter, and by this time the older sons had children. (2) It was also entirely possible that other unnamed daughters had also been born, some marrying their half-brothers. (3) Some of the sons, such as Judah had married outside the family and those wives would have been considered daughters of the patriarch.

37:36 *Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar [a Targum states that Potiphar was the chief executioner], one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard.* (NIV)

Foreshadowing

What happened to Joseph foreshadowed all that would happen to the family of Jacob. They would all go down into Egypt and be placed into slavery.