

The Story of Joseph

Robe of Wrath

Part 3 – January 22, 2012

You know the difference between God’s wrath and mine? I just want to retaliate; He just wants to redeem! Let’s talk about *that coat!* Talk about wrath! If it was soaked in gas it wouldn’t have been more volatile.

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 for him. (37:3)

The language is vague; it could’ve been long-sleeved, embroidered, striped, colorful, or a combination. Doesn’t matter, but I’m going with colorful. Flash-forward to when he goes to his brothers.

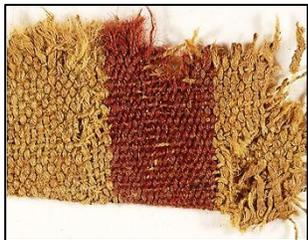
... they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him. –
Genesis 37:18 NIV



Tomb of Khnumhotep II, B.C. 1890

They either plot *really-really* fast, or he’s *really* visible! 4000-year-old, Egyptian tomb paintings depict Semitic traders, same region and era as Joseph, arriving in Egypt to sell eye makeup.

And some of the men are dressed in their finest: colorful, striped garments. Joseph’s robe probably wasn’t even *that* unique.



The Israel Antiquities Authorities have a collection of 2000-year-old striped, Jewish, woolen textiles! So, what’s up with Joseph’s robe? It’s one thing for Jacob to love him more, but *why announce it?!* There’s *no* mention of animosity toward Joseph until that *hate-inspiring coat* comes along.

What prompted Jacob to make it? When we left off, Rachel (Jacob’s *favoritest* wife) had died. Her tomb still stands in Bethlehem ... though it’s *slightly* obscured by cement barricades, camouflage netting, and a machine-gun turret.



Rachel’s Tomb in the 1930’s



Rachel’s Tomb today



Area of Hebron/Beersheba/Gaza, 1890’s

So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). Over her tomb Jacob set up a pillar, and to this day that pillar marks Rachel's tomb. Israel moved on again and pitched his tent beyond Migdal Eder. While Israel was living in that region, Reuben [he's the firstborn of the unloved wife, Leah] went in and slept with his father's concubine Bilhah [Rachel's handmaid; the mother of Reuben's step-brothers ... gross!], and Israel heard of it. Jacob had twelve sons: – *Genesis 35:19-22a NIV*

Some say Jacob did *nothing* in response; because it just goes on to list his sons, and his brother, Esau's descendants, and then *our story* starts. But Jacob *did* something ... *something drastic!* Flash-forward to a "boring" genealogy in First Chronicles ...

[Reuben] was the firstborn, but when he defiled his father's marriage bed, *his rights as firstborn were given to the sons of Joseph ... the rights of the firstborn belonged to Joseph ...* – *1 Chronicles 5:1-2 NIV condensed*

Joseph was given Reuben's authority, blessing, and double portion! Bilhah and Zilpah's half-Jewish sons weren't eligible; but, Leah had five other sons, older than Joseph, who were in line ahead of him to receive it ... *unless ... unless they were somehow complicit.*

Rachel was Jacob's favorite; and as the favorite, she would've shared his tent. So the question is, *after* she died and "Israel moved on again and pitched his tent", who got to move in? It should've been Leah, she's the only full-fledge wife. But Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid, is raising the son Rachel died giving birth to (Benjamin). And Bilhah was the closest to Rachel. And Bilhah's been part of Rachel's household since the wedding.

But, if Bilhah had moved into Jacob's tent, it would've *devastated* poor Leah, and *enraged* her already marginalized sons. And in his wrath, her eldest son might exact revenge for the humiliation of his mother *and* defile Jacob's handmaid to prevent her from usurping his mother's place as Jacob's primary wife. Want to know where Bilhah was when Reuben slept with her? Let's flash-forward to Jacob's deathbed as he's blessing his sons.

Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, the first sign of my strength, excelling in honor, excelling in power. Turbulent as the waters, you will no longer excel, for you went up onto your *father's bed*, [in Jacob's tent] onto my couch and *defiled it* [was that Reuben's motive?]. – *Genesis 49:3-4 NIV*

Remember, we're speculating here. But, it certainly offers a reason for *all* of Leah's sons to defend Reuben and to pour out their pent-up resentment against Jacob. It could'a got ugly! And if their rebellious wrath was united, who's left to receive the birthright?! This might be why the writer gives us a list of the sons right here. So we can check 'em off!

The sons of Leah: *check!* The handmaid's sons: *check!* That leaves a 17-year-old who brings bad reports about his brothers. But ... Jacob's brother *Esau* was older; and the writer now reminds us that "Esau took his wives from the women of *Canaan*". (Gen 36:2) That's a *no-no*; so, older doesn't mean wiser or more obedient. But Joseph?! Don't underestimate what a struggle this must have been for Jacob. Remember how Jacob's name was changed to Israel (which means "he struggles with God")?

God said to him, “Your name is Jacob, but you will *no longer* be called Jacob; your name will be Israel.” – Genesis 35:10a NIV

But then verse 14 says, “Jacob set up a stone pillar”; and verse 15 says, “Jacob named the place”, and verse 20, “Jacob set up a pillar”. But, in verse 21 where Jacob’s struggle *really* begins, it says “Israel moved on again and pitched his tent”. It’s the first time since being named that he’s referred to as “he struggles with God”. And then, “While Israel was living in that region, Reuben went in and slept with his father’s concubine Bilhah”, and, “Israel heard of it” He was *told* of it ... it might have been announced, by *Reuben*!

And then the checklist: “Jacob had twelve sons”. And then the reminder about *Jacob* and Esau, and Esau’s descendants, and *only* the name Jacob is used (eight times) until ...

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 for him. (37:3)

I think Jacob made something to signify the promotion *and* the punishment, both a coat of consecration *and* a robe of wrath. It might have had twelve colored stripes to represent each brother!

When his brothers saw that their father loved [honored, esteemed] him more than any of them, they *hated* him [Such a *strong* word.] and could not speak a kind word to him. [Lit. they refused to speak “shalom” to him, the Hebrew *hello* and *goodbye* that means “peace and wellbeing to you”. Each time Joseph says, “Shalom”, they say, “Buzz off!”] (37:4)

It’s *unmistakably* hostile *and* intimidating *and* hurtful. And he has to wonder if dad made a good, godly choice or a hasty, angry decision. You know his brothers were giving him an earful. But God confirms the decision and reassures Joseph with a dream! And whether desperate to defend his new status, or just relieved and overjoyed that it actually *is* God’s will, he blurts it out in a way that only further diminishes his brothers.

Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they *hated* him all the more. [Such a *strong* word.] (37:5)



Maybe he thinks he’ll command their respect if he shares it with the firmness of a firstborn. But don’t repay hatred with hardness; you can only (maybe) melt the hate with mercy and grace.

He said to them, “Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it.” (37:6-7)

Strangely enough, when the famine comes, and they do bow down, it’s because they need his grain!

His brothers said to him, “Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?” And they hated him all the more [Such a *strong* word.] because of his dream *and what he had said*. [The *tactless* way in which he’d shared it.] (37:8)



Then he had *another* dream, [Uh-oh, don't do it ...] and he told it to his brothers. "Listen," he said, "I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me." [The kid's got *chutzpa!* If they thought the dream was absurd they would've just laughed at him ... but they *didn't.*] (37:9)

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?" [And something *profound* happens] His brothers were *jealous* of him, [Such a *significant* word. They hated the first dream, but *envied* the second.] (37:10-11a)

We can see the reason if we flash-forward 13 years.

[Joseph is interpreting Pharaoh's second dream; and he says] The *reason* the dream was given to Pharaoh *in two forms* is that the matter has been *firmly decided by God*, and *God will do it soon.* – *Genesis 41:32 NIV*

This is what was believed about back-to-back dreams. Joseph's brothers have become believers! Hatred mixes with *jealousy*. And they know they must act quickly ... the fuse is lit. But one brother is *sure* quiet. He seems *oddly* comforted, inspired even, that he's one of the stars. It's like God is reassuring him that his sins *haven't* cut him off from God's plan ... and *love*. Maybe that's why he'll physically intervene, ten verses from now, when his brothers propose murder.

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.* – *Genesis 37:21-22 NIV*

If *anyone* has a motive for revenge, it's Reuben! He's lost everything to Joseph. But the weight of what his wrath has wrought has become hideously clear. And he's genuinely sorry. And now he wants to rescue Joseph and restore him to his father.

You think you're too big'a mess-up for God to use? Here's a flash: He only uses mess-ups! Know why? That's all there is! Everyone's broken and wounded and under the curse. Church, ministry, family, life ... it's all about the less-wounded helping the more-wounded. When you're less-wounded, help the more-wounded; when you're more-wounded, accept help from the less-wounded. But don't expect anyone (except Jesus) to be un-wounded. That warped perspective will only bring out the wrath in you.

His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind. [I wonder where *Jacob's thoughts took him.*] (37:11)

He'd been chosen over *his older brother*, Esau. And even though Esau had wanted revenge, it all worked out. And Jacob's *father* Isaac had been chosen over *his older brother*, Ishmael. And even though the Ishmaelites "lived in hostility with all their brothers" (Gen 25:18) ... it was workin' out. What Jacob *can't* know is that a caravan of Ishmaelites, headed to Egypt, is about to be offered a little revenge at *Joseph's* expense. Question is, will Reuben get there in time to save him? And the answer is ... *yes!* And this is where we have to close God's story for today.