

## ***Here Comes this Dreamer***

By Dr. Dave Neale

So what is this story of Joseph and his brothers really about? Why was it preserved for us? What does it mean for how we live life today?<sup>1</sup>

The Joseph Cycle (37-50) continues on the same basis as the Abraham and Jacob Cycles before it – the hope of God’s promise circumscribed repeatedly by jealousy, betrayal and violence.

Sibling rivalry, which is primarily what we have in view in this story, wasn’t new or confined to Israelite history. Not at all.

There is a good reason this story still resonates thirty centuries later. I mean, who hasn’t wanted to throw their little brother into a waterless pit?

I should know, I was the little brother in my family. And while I don’t remember being the favourite, it may account for how merciless my two older brothers were to me.

I wasn’t the youngest. That was Kathy, my dear little sister, 6 years younger than me, so she was the family darling.

I remember that one day my brother Jerry and I decided it would be amusing to play catch with Kathy by throwing her from bed to bed in the bedroom in our basement in Idaho Falls. She would have been 3 or 4 years old; I suppose. And, of course, when we dropped her she got knocked out. So I was delegated by Jerry to go upstairs and tell Dad that we had killed Kathy.

All I remember is that, you know how some aunt used to knit everyone slippers from yarn back in the day? And all I can remember is Dad rounding the corner in the basement at speed and his feet slipping sideways as he sped down the hall.

Fortunately, by the time he got there she had come around, and went on to live a happy life.

You have to understand, young people, that back in the days of my youth, as in the days of the Old Testament, fathers didn’t do half the house work. They weren’t expected to be sensitive and affirming. Dads were these god-like beings that you didn’t really want to have much to do with.

Because, if you did, it was likely to be a referral by Mom, “Just wait until your father gets home.” And then we would all be total angels the rest of the day in the hopes that it would mitigate the judgment that was about to befall us. Which was the point of the referral I guess.

That’s was patriarchy!

Joseph, the 17-year-old self-absorbed, arrogant youngest of twelve sons of Jacob, was shepherding with his brothers, ***...and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father*** (Gen 37:2).

Joseph was sent out to spy on his brothers by Jacob and, for sure, Joseph was going to get some rough treatment from the other 11 brothers.

Joseph was a big fat tattletale!

As to the famous “coat of many colours” (“long robe with sleeves,” as the NRSV renders it), the Hebrew word is obscure, כְּתוֹת, *ktōt*. The “coat of many colors” we traditionally hear is based on the Greek in the LXX. <sup>2</sup> The tunic “is worn close to the skin, by both sexes.”

Jesus mocks the habit of the Cynics who wear “two tunics” (Matt 10:10). But it is basically a garment worn by those who don’t have to do manual labour, thus the long sleeves. It is also mocked as in one ancient source as effeminate on a man.

***Here comes this dreamer!*** This makes fun of his dreams in this chapter where the brothers’ sheaves of wheat bow down to him, the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to him, but also that his dress implies that he is above physical labour. When the strip him of his long-sleeved robe (v 23) they symbolically reject him as a member of the family.

As the story develops and they plot to kill him but Reuben and Judah think better of it and convince them to not kill Joseph but just throw him into a pit and then sell him to some passing caravan. They were a couple of bleeding hearts, these two.

Joseph’s brothers had not repented of their intent to kill him, they were afraid that they would get caught. They remembered that Cain killed his brother Abel in Gen 4. When the Lord asked Cain where his brother was and Cain said “Gee, I don’t know!” And the Lord said, that’s funny, because I hear ***...your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground!*** (Gen 4:10)

There was a belief in the Ancient Near East that blood could not be “concealed,” that is, it cries out to be requited.

A few miles north of Shechem where this incident occurs is the trading route from Syria to Egypt – the route by which the riches of the orient made their way to the Mediterranean, and goods back to the east.<sup>3</sup> We are to understand that international trade was a well-established pattern in human society by this time.

We come to an important line you might have easily passed over in the reading: ***...Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.*** (Gen 37:27)

Ishmael born of Hagar according to Gen 16, was to be a ***...wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone... he shall live at odds with all his kin.*** This is thought to be a reference to the Bedouin style of life.<sup>4</sup>

God said that, in spite of the animus of Sarah, he would ***...make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring*** (Gen 21:13). Gen 17:20 says, ***As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation.***<sup>5</sup>

The biblical story asserts that God created not one great nation, but two. One the nation of Israel, and the other the nation of Ishmael, both with twelve tribes, both with a great and prosperous progeny. Both undeniably historical entities.

Scholarship is well established in the evidence that the Ishmaelites were, “a major tribal confederacy extending all over northern Arabia” from about 1100 BCE to the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE under the Assyrians.

They were able to control the long-distance trade across the Arabian deserts well into the time of the Prophets. And by the way, the first rulers of the “Arab tribes were, to a large extent, women.”<sup>6</sup>

The incense trade was the main product of the route east to west.

To say nothing of the fact that, by the Middle Ages, Arab culture flourished from southern France to Eastern China, forming one of the greatest empires the world has seen.<sup>7</sup>

That it was the Ishmaelites who carried the boy away is a poignant intersection of the two peoples of God. The story teaches us that the hand of God was shaping the course of history through his many and varied people. One day a tribe of Ishmaelites, just passing through central Canaan, are the hand of God for salvation.

They carry the foolish and unfortunate young Joseph off to Egypt, where, taken into the house of Potifar, he becomes the saviour of the nation.

### From the Text

That an arrogant young man is betrayed by his brothers and sold off to hostile slave traders is *micro-perception* of what happened. The macro-perception is that God is working to save his people... *through the Ishmaelites*, and then on to save all of Israel by Joseph's activities in Egypt.

The Hand of God at work in life is hidden – but... the Hand of God is at work.

Modern Christian spirituality has an unfortunate tendency to define God through self-fulfilment and a focus on our micro-perceptions of life. Some have called this our “therapeutic culture,” where instead of deriving our sense of self from God, we derive it from “how I feel about myself.”<sup>8</sup>

Peace of mind becomes the thing we seek most of all. David Brooks says this makes our public culture “impulsive, dramatic, erratic and cruel.”

Mature faith understands that “the world isn't a giant story about me.”<sup>9</sup>

And while this story cautions us, of course, about the corrosive nature of sibling rivalry - an encouragement to keep greed, jealousy, the grudge and lack of forgiveness out of the family dynamic, and to guard its health above all.

More broadly, it teaches us that if we want to be the calm people of faith that God calls us to be, we have to adopt the perception of God as the overarching reality of all things in our lives.

We can stay calm amid the storms *because we see the present in its larger context*. We see, as David Brooks says, “the present challenges from a long-term vantage... we are considerate to and gracious to others... and withstand the setbacks: *because we see God in everything*.”

<sup>1</sup> Reading text: Genesis 37:1-4 and 12-21 and 27-28.

<sup>2</sup> It is rendered a “many colored tunic,” χιτωνά ποικίλος, *chitōna poikilos*.

<sup>3</sup> Verse 28 got past the continuity editors because the Midianite traders are a different group than the Ishmaelites.

<sup>4</sup> Adam dies at 800 years. Noah at 600. The patriarchs tend to die between 100-200 and by the time we get to the Psalms the normal lifespan is 70 years (Ps 90:10 *The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong*, ostensibly a prayer of Moses). The numbers have symbolic meaning rather than literal meaning. As you move from pre-history to history the lifespans become more reasonable – although not entirely. Abraham dies at 175 years according to Gen 25:7; Isaac 180, Gen 35:28.

<sup>5</sup> Long story short, the tribes of the sons of Ishmael are traceable to the eighth century BCE during the Assyrian period. See *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ABD), vol III, p. 514ff.

<sup>6</sup> ABD. III, p. 517.

<sup>7</sup> And, by the way, nurturing literature, poetry and the preservation of ancient Greek philosophy, rediscovered by western Christians and eventually setting the stage for the Enlightenment. The great Jewish philosopher Maimonides wrote his *Guide for the Perplexed* in Arabic. In another time (530 BCE) the great prince of Persia, Cyrus, liberated the people of the Book to return to their homeland, earning him the reference as the Messiah in Isaiah (44:28, 45:1). Cyrus is ruler under whom the temple destroyed by the Babylonians was rebuilt.

<sup>8</sup> David Brooks, *Hey, America, Grow Up!* New York Times, Aug 10, 2023

<sup>9</sup> Gregg Popovich is the head coach of the San Antonio Spurs and has just become the all-time leader in coaching wins in the NBA. 1,336 wins and counting. The first thing he tells his players, something he learned at the Air Force Academy, is “get over yourself.”