



We pray for those who, like Rachel, live lives of frustration and fulfilment, love and despair, scheming and intrigue, who can be overwhelmed by the turns of fortune. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for those who, like Isaac, are born in transit and live as aliens in lands foreign to them, those who are struggling to belong. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for those who, like Joseph, find themselves deeply wounded by people they love—people they thought they knew and trusted—those who are struggling to know how to respond. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Amen.

Please read Genesis 35 and 37 before the study, if you are able:

The questions we may discuss are listed on the following pages.

35:16 Then they journeyed from Bethel; and when they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel was in childbirth, and she had hard labour. 17 When she was in her hard labour, the midwife said to her, "Do not be afraid; for now you will have another son."

18 As her soul was departing (for she died), she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. 19 So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem), 20 and Jacob set up a pillar at her grave; it is the pillar of Rachel's tomb, which is there to this day. 21 Israel journeyed on, and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder.

22 While Israel lived in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine; and Israel heard of it.

Now the sons of Jacob were twelve. 23 The sons of Leah: Reuben (Jacob's firstborn), Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. 24 The sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin. 25 The sons of Bilhah, Rachel's maid: Dan and Naphtali. 26 The sons of Zilpah, Leah's maid: Gad and Asher. These were the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram.

27 Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, or Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had resided as aliens.

28 Now the days of Isaac were one hundred eighty years. 29 And Isaac breathed his last; he died and was gathered to his people, old and full of days; and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.

37:1 Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. 2 This is the story of the family of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. 3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. 4 But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

5 Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. 6 He said to them, "Listen to this dream that I dreamed. 7 There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf." 8 His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?" So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words.

9 He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, "Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." 10 But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, "What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?" 11 So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

12 Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. 13 And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am." 14 So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.

He came to Shechem, 15 and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" 16 "I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." 17 The man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan.

18 They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. 19 They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. 20 Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams." 21 But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life."

22 Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him" — that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. 23 So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; 24 and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

25 Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. 26 Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? 27 Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers agreed.

28 When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

29 When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes. 30 He returned to his brothers, and said, "The boy is gone; and I, where can I turn?" 31 Then they took Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood.

32 They had the long robe with sleeves taken to their father, and they said, "This we have found; see now whether it is your son's robe or not." 33 He recognized it, and said, "It is my son's robe! A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces."

34 Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. 35 All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning." Thus his father bewailed him.

36 Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard.

1 Aliens in the land

This passage tells the story of two marriages: Jacob and Leah, Jacob and Rachel. It also includes mention Zilpah, Leah's servant, and Bilhah, Rachel's servant, with whom Jacob later had relationships. Some people today talk loudly about "biblical marriage".

Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, are "aliens in the land" of Canaan? Jacob spent much of his life in the Aramean land of Haran, where he married two Aramean women. How does this change the way we read the stories of the great patriarchs and matriarchs?

2 The story moves on

This week we leave behind the stories of the three patriarchs of Israel, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and their wives, the four matriarchs Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel. Jacob is still alive, and he will return for some of the final scenes of Genesis in chapters 46 and 48—50. But now we turn our attention to Joseph, who had been born to Jacob's wife Rachel, after years of waiting.

Here's the way that Saddleback portrays the scene in the video of "Joseph, his dreams, and his coat"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VnlqKPIZQzI>

How did Jacob's open favoritism toward Joseph affect the attitudes and actions of his other sons?

Have you ever seen or experienced similar favoritism in a family? Or in a group or church you belonged to?

What were the consequences of such favoritism being shown?

Joseph shared his dreams of greatness with his family even though it made his brothers angry. Was sharing the dreams a sign of youthful bragging or a faithful report of what God showed him?

3 The brothers

What were those brothers thinking with what they did? Again, the text notes that, after Joseph explained his dream to them, "they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words" (37:8). A second dream didn't help the situation. After the brothers went off to pasture their sheep elsewhere, Joseph ran after them, "and before he came near to them", the text notes "they conspired to kill him" (37:18). Ahh, such brotherly love!

Do you think that the ethical standards and cultural practices of our time have become more developed over time, and are different from what held sway in past eras? Or do we still have poor, inadequate, imperfect moral standards?

4 Dysfunctional over generations

Let's return to the family situation and explore that a little more. Today we talk about intergenerational trauma: when bad events in the past hurt a person, and somehow those negative consequences get passed on to their children, and grandchildren, and more. Perhaps the Genesis stories offer ancient evidence for what we are discovering today?

The family had a long history of lying, trickery, and rivalry. How do you see generational bad habits passed down through Joseph's family? Do you think that such ethics are inherited, or taught?

Why weren't these stories excised from the long saga of the ancestors? What was the value in retelling them over and over?

5 How do we see Jews; or, the seeds of antisemitism?

Perhaps we need also to note that this particular incident, selling Joseph for twenty pieces of silver, resonates with the later story of Judas betraying Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. This element of betrayal for money, of course, has fed into the unhelpful stereotype of the Jews who are always and in every way concerned about money. It's a stereotype that has fed the burgeoning antisemitic attitude and actions of people throughout the Middle Ages, though the Enlightenment on into the modern age—culminating, of course, in the horrors of the Shoah (Holocaust) in Nazi Germany. And even today, we have a Royal Commission into Antisemitism and Social Cohesion at work in Australia.

Have you experienced negative stereotypes about Jews? How do you deal with that when you encounter it?

6 The aftermath

Judah convinced the brothers to sell Joseph into slavery instead of killing him, presenting it as a practical choice. They chose the better option, even though it was not a good thing they were doing.

How do you think the brothers lived with the secret and the guilt of deceiving their father Jacob for over twenty years?

How do people today talk themselves into thinking that they are being reasonable or kind, when they are actually doing the wrong thing? Can you think of an example?

7 Egypt

People hearing the story when it was written into the scrolls, after their return from Exile, would know of the time of slavery spent by their ancestors in Egypt, when “the Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service” (Exod 1:13–14). They would know the potential threat that lies over Joseph at the end of this week's story: “they took Joseph to Egypt” (Gen 37:28). The question remains: what fate awaits Joseph?

How would Israelites in exile in Babylon have heard the story of Joseph? What would it be telling them? Does this explain why it gets so much space in Genesis (14 of 50 chapters; almost 30%)?

Again: Why weren't these stories excised from the long saga of the ancestors? What was the value in retelling them over and over?

John's blog on this passage is at

<https://johnsquires.com/2023/08/11/here-comes-this-dreamer-let-us-kill-him-gen-37-pentecost-11a/>