

Book of Genesis – Part XVI - Genesis 36-38

“Dreams and Nightmares”

These next three chapters all deal with different groups and situations. We read about the descendents of Esau, Joseph and his brothers and then learn of Judah's family. The three accounts seem hardly connected. However in different ways they are all part of the developing history of Israel. The story of Joseph will become the dominant story of the remainder of Genesis.

- I. The Descendents of Esau – chapter 36:1-43
 - a. Needless to say the sections on genealogies in Scripture are probably perceived by the modern reader as the least interesting (suitable for reading if you're having trouble sleeping).
 - b. Nevertheless they were perceived as important by Israel and it is no accident that the first book of the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew, begins with a genealogy. This chapter lists the descendents of Esau which become the nation of Edom. Edom existed south of Israel and played a prominent role in Israel's history. For much of that history they were rivals to Israel. When Israel was under attack in the eighth century BC, Edom took advantage of the situation and invaded the southern kingdom of Judah (II Chron. 28:17). Later when Judah was conquered by the Babylonians, Edom rejoiced (Ps. 137:7). As a consequence, God placed a severe judgment on Edom (Isa. 34:5-10).
 - c. The reference in v. 31 to the fact that Edom had kings before Israel is a clear indication that Genesis in its present form was written well after the events it records. While Moses may have supplied some of the material, clearly later writers were involved (Moses would hardly have written the account of his own death (Deut. 34:5-6)).

- II. Joseph – the favored son – chapter 37:1-36
 - a. This next section identifies itself as being “the story of the family of Jacob” (37:2). Actually it is the story of Joseph, the firstborn son of Rachel, the wife whom Jacob loved.
 - b. Jacob is given a special robe. It has been translated as “a robe of many colors” or “a long robe with sleeves” (v. 3). The same expression is used for a royal robe (II Sam. 13:18). The fact that Joseph is clearly favored by his father not only leads to resentment on the part of his brothers (who are really half brothers) but to outright hatred (37:4).
 - c. Joseph has special dreams. Throughout the Scriptures, as well as much of the ancient world, dreams were regarded as having prophetic insight. They were believed to predict the future or serve as communications from God. They play a significant role, for example, in the Christmas story (Matt. 1:20; 2:13). These dreams make it abundantly clear that Joseph will be superior to his older brothers. They will bow down to him (37:7, 9). These dreams obviously foretell Joseph's destiny in Egypt. However the brothers see this only as unbearable pride on Joseph's part. Even his father rebukes him (37:10). In the ancient world, both within the Bible and outside it, pride is the worst sin. Adam and Eve succumb to the prideful temptation to want to be like God (Gen. 3:4). Joseph

however is being judged falsely here. He is not being proud. If anything he is simply naïve in telling the contents of his dream to his family who don't comprehend or accept what he is saying at all.

- d. The narrative now moves to a decisive point. The brothers have taken the sheep away to some distance. This is an obvious need since grazing flocks would have to be constantly moving. Jacob sends Joseph to find his brothers to see how they are doing (37:14). It takes Joseph a while to find the brothers. He has to ask directions to locate them (37:17). Apparently the brothers see Joseph first "from a distance" (37:18). We read then that "they conspired to kill him" (37:18). They have gone well beyond resentment and even hatred now to the point of planning to commit murder. They are following the example of Cain who murdered his brother Abel (Gen. 4:8). We see how far removed the creation is from the "very good" world which God had originally created (Gen. 1:31).
- e. The brothers have an immediate idea. They will give the impression that Joseph was attacked and killed by a wild animal. The fact that they come up with this idea so quickly suggests that they had already discussed the possibility (37:19). Reuben, the eldest, plans to save Joseph and offers an alternative idea of throwing him into a pit. His intention is to come back and rescue Joseph (37:22). What is striking about this is that Reuben doesn't oppose his brothers directly. As the firstborn we might think he would have the authority to do so. Apparently the other brothers' hatred is so intense that he sees no way of talking them out of some plan to get rid of Joseph. This foretells the scene of Jesus' trial where Pilate is trying to deliver Jesus out of the hands of the mob. As the Roman ruler he should have had the authority to overrule the crowd. Yet, like Reuben, he cannot overturn the murderous intent he faces (Luke 23:20-21).
- f. Reuben does persuade the brothers to put Joseph into a pit. They take off his special coat (37:23-24). We are not told of Joseph's reaction to this violence and betrayal. Like Jesus, he is silent before his enemies. Apparently Reuben has left the scene. The rest of the brothers sit down to eat (their consciences don't seem to bother them in the least). While eating they see some Ishmaelite traders on their way to Egypt (37:25-27). This accomplishes the task of getting rid of their hated brother (they think) without having to murder him directly. As Jesus was sold for silver, they sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver (37:28; Matt. 26:15).
- g. The scene changes to Reuben's return. To his shock he finds the pit empty. His plan to rescue Joseph has failed (37:29). The brothers dip Joseph's coat in the blood of a goat and bring it back to their father claiming that Joseph was killed by a wild beast.
- h. There are many dark features to this story. Reuben, in spite of his concern for Joseph, apparently goes along with the plot and doesn't tell his father what happened. He therefore becomes an accessory. The fact that the animal they kill is a goat may have other significance. The goat was associated with occult practices and "goat demons" are mentioned throughout the Old Testament and other ancient literature. The goat was also identified with the demon Azazel (Lev. 16:8-10; Lev. 17:7; Isa. 34:14). The brothers, in some sense, may be descending into the demonic with their evil actions. This becomes more evident given the tremendous sorrow which Jacob expresses once told that his son is

dead. Of course this is a lie. Jacob's sorrow is so intense that no one in the family can comfort him. His sorrow will last the rest of his life (37:34-35). The brothers then can only be seen here in the most negative light. Not only have they planned to murder their own brother, then sold him into slavery, they have also brought immense sorrow on their father. They can only be described as heartless and cruel. The completely unbelievable thing is that they will, as the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel, represent God's chosen people!

- i. This part of the story ends with Joseph being sold to Potiphar in Egypt, the captain of the Pharaoh's guard (37:36). The story ends with a "to be continued" sense.

III. Judah and his family – chapter 38

- a. The narrative shifts gears considerably as we are told now of Judah's family apparently years later. His children are fully grown. Judah has married a Canaanite woman (38:2), the very thing that Isaac and Jacob avoided doing. He proceeds to have several children by her.
- b. He takes a wife named Tamar for his eldest son named Er (38:6). The clear indication is that Tamar herself is a Canaanite. We read however that Er "was wicked in the sight of the Lord" and God put him to death. The impression that is inescapable in these stories is that the world, like the world before the flood, was full of wickedness (Gen. 6:5).
- c. According to ancient custom which was later incorporated into God's law, a widow was to be given to her brother in law. Their children would legally belong to the deceased brother (cf. Deut. 25: 5-6). Tamar is therefore given to the next brother, Onan (38:8). Onan, however, realizing that any children Tamar bears would legally inherit the property of his dead brother (and thereby diminish his inheritance), lets his seed fall to the ground every time he sleeps with Tamar (38:9). Tamar therefore is being abused since a woman counted on being cared for later in life by her children. This is why widows and orphans are singled out in Scripture as being especially vulnerable (Ex. 22:22). God is displeased with Onan and puts him to death as he had Onan's older brother (38:10).
- d. This meant that Tamar then should be given to the next brother, Shelah. Yet apparently Shelah is too young to marry at this point. Judah then takes the unusual step of sending her back to her father's house (38:11). This would not have been the normal practice. As a daughter in law Tamar was now a part of Judah's household. However at this point Judah basically is afraid that Tamar is bad luck and that his third son will die if he gets involved with her (38:11).
- e. With the passage of time it seems that Judah conveniently forgets about Tamar. Judah's wife dies. Shelah has grown up and it is clear that Judah is not going to give Tamar to him. After a time of mourning Judah goes to shear his sheep. Tamar hears about Judah's intended journey and puts a veil on and positions herself beside the road. Judah does not recognize her and thinks she is a temple prostitute. Temple prostitutes were not ordinary prostitutes (described by the demeaning word, "whore"). They were often even married women in the service of one of the ancient goddesses, Astarte or Ishtar.
- f. Judah approaches her and Tamar shrewdly asks for a pledge. According to the terms of the transaction Judah sends her a kid from his flock. However when Judah's friend comes with the promised kid he cannot find her since Tamar has

returned to her home. None of the townspeople know of a temple prostitute (38:21-22). This would be strange since temple prostitutes would have had some social standing and significance related to the temple practices of one of the gods. This practice was of course condemned later in Israel (Deut. 23:17-18).

- g. In due time it is learned that Tamar is pregnant. She is accused of being a whore and threatened with burning (38: 24). She produces the pledges that Judah had given her and he confesses that she was more in the right than he was since he did not give his son Shelah to her (38:26).
- h. Tamar gives birth to twins one of whom is given a crimson thread (38:27-28). The crimson thread also shows up in the story of Rahab in the Book of Joshua (Joshua 2:18). It is perhaps not too much of a leap to think of the crimson stream of blood at Jesus' crucifixion (John 19:34). Jesus is descended from Judah through Tamar (Matt. 1:3).
- i. Once again we see that in the midst of human brokenness God continues to act to fulfill his purpose of salvation. God is clearly in no way dependent upon human beings who continue to fail again and again.

Questions for Us –

1. The story of Joseph and his brothers is unfortunately one of hatred within a family. What lessons can we learn from this story?
2. What do you think of Reuben? Does he negate his earlier good intentions by going along with the brothers' deception later? Do you see him as a tragic figure? What can we learn from his example?
3. The story of Judah and Tamar is one of many sordid ones in Scripture. Why do you think Matthew singles out Tamar as one of the ancestors of Jesus?

Next study – Genesis 39-41 – “Joseph, Prime Minister of Egypt”