

Genesis 37 – Joseph Sold into Slavery

Review

So far in our study of Genesis we have seen the stories and genealogies from creation to the Great Flood in Noah's day (Genesis 1-5), from the flood to God's calling of Abram (Genesis 6-11), the life of Abraham and his sons Isaac and Ishmael (Genesis 12-25), and the life of Jacob and the birth of his sons who became the patriarchs of God's chosen people Israel (Genesis 26-36)

Beginning with Genesis 37, we come finally to the last major section of the book of Genesis – the story of Jacob's second-youngest son Joseph whom God used to rescue Jacob's family out of a devastating famine and thereby preserve the line of Jacob's son Judah from which Jesus of Nazareth was to be born.

Joseph's Dreams

¹Jacob lived in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan.

²These are the generations of Jacob.

Joseph, being seventeen years old, was pasturing the flock with his brothers. He was a boy with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives. And Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. ³Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors. ⁴But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him. Genesis 37:1-4 (ESV)

Recall that Joseph was the first son of Jacob's favorite wife Rachel. In previous studies, we have looked at the evils that arise in families when the parents play favorites with their children. In particular, we saw that Isaac's favorite of his two twin sons was Esau while his wife Rebekah's favorite was Jacob. Recall that this favoritism led to a twenty-year estrangement between the boys, and eventually Esau's descendants the Edomites became enemies of the nation of Israel and remain so even until the present day.

As we shall see in this passage, Jacob's favoritism toward Joseph caused his brothers to be jealous of him. Nevertheless, God in His infinite wisdom used even the hatred and jealousy of Joseph's brothers to fulfill His plan of salvation for all mankind through the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. As Joseph himself noted many years later, “*...you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good...*” (Genesis 50:20). But I'm getting ahead of the story.

The sons of Bilhah – Rachel's maidservant – were Dan and Naphtali (Genesis 30:5-8). The sons of Zilpah – Leah's maidservant – were Gad and Asher (Genesis 30:9-13). We are given no particulars of the “bad report” about them that Joseph gave to Jacob. But every schoolchild knows that nobody likes a tattletale.

Before we continue, notice the names Jacob and Israel are both used to refer to him here in this passage as they are throughout the remainder of Genesis.

ASIDE – Most Bible readers are familiar with the so-called “*robe of many colors*” Jacob made for his favorite son Joseph. However, the meaning of the Hebrew text of Genesis 37:3 doesn't really support this translation. In fact, the phrase כְּתֹנֶת פָּסִים - *kutōneṭ pas* translated in the KJV as “*coat of many colours*” doesn't include any descriptive adjective at all. The idea that this robe, coat, or tunic was multicolored seems to have been made up out of whole cloth (nyuk, nyuk, nyuk) by the KJV translators and others who have derived their own translations partially from the KJV. The CSB calls this garment “*a long-sleeved robe*,” while the NLT calls it “*beautiful*,” the NIV says it was

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“*ornate*,” and NET simply says it was “*special*.” I looked at various German language translations as well, and their versions of this verse are just as varied as the English translations.

None of this silly discussion has any relevance to the story at hand of course, except that the gift of the special garment Jacob made for Joseph reinforced his favoritism and hardened the ill will of Joseph’s brothers toward him.

5Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. 6He said to them, “Hear this dream that I have dreamed: 7Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf.” 8His brothers said to him, “Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?” So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.

9Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, “Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” 10But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, “What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?” 11And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind. Genesis

37:5-11 (ESV)

Dreams feature prominently in God’s communication with mankind throughout His Word. In our study of Genesis, we have already seen that God warned Abimelech in a dream not to touch Abraham’s wife Sarah after Abraham lied to him saying she was his sister (Genesis 20:3). Perhaps most famous of the dreams in the Bible is Jacob’s dream in Genesis 28:10-22 of a stairway leading up from the Earth to Heaven from the top of which God appeared to Jacob and reiterated the promise first given to Abraham that his descendants would inherit the land of Canaan.

As we shall see, Pharaoh’s dreams and the interpretation of them were a central factor in Joseph’s life in Egypt. Clearly, the interpretation of Joseph’s two dreams recounted in this passage was perfectly clear to Jacob’s brothers and father. But there is for us a small mystery in this passage. In Genesis 37:9, Joseph says he saw eleven stars in his dream. These symbolized Joseph’s eleven brothers including his younger brother Benjamin. But recall from Genesis 35 that Joseph and Benjamin’s mother Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin.

So that begs the question – which of Jacob’s three remaining wives was the mother represented by the moon in Joseph’s dream to whom Jacob referred in his rebuke of Joseph in Genesis 37:10? Who had raised Joseph after Rachel died? We can only guess. No mention is made of Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah after Jacob’s return from Paddan-Aram except regarding their roles as the mothers of the patriarchs of Israel and a single mention of Leah’s burial in the cave of Machpelah by Jacob sometime before his own death in Egypt that we read in Genesis 49.

Joseph’s Brothers Sell Him into Slavery in Egypt

12Now his brothers went to pasture their father’s flock near Shechem.

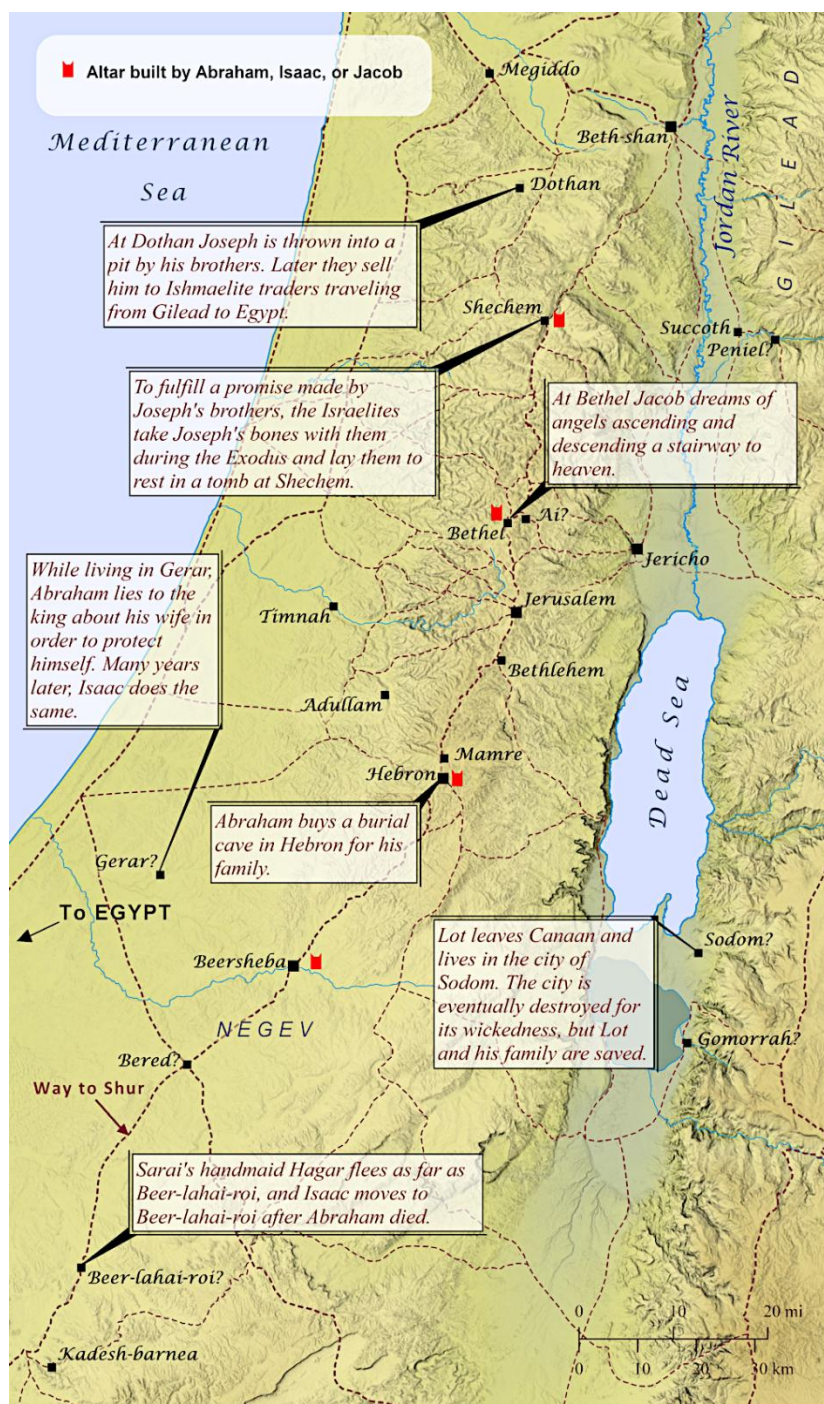
13And Israel said to Joseph, “Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.” And he said to him, “Here I am.”

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¹⁴So he said to him, “Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock, and bring me word.” So he sent him from the Valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem. ¹⁵And a man found him wandering in the fields. And 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.” ¹⁷And 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.

Genesis 37:12-17 (ESV)

Look at the Patriarch's in Canaan map.



Recall that after Jacob returned from Paddan-Aram, he went to dwell in his father Isaac's tents by the oaks of Mamre near Hebron. Sometime during Jacob's twenty-year stay in Paddan-Aram, Isaac and Rebekah had moved up from Beersheba in the Negev back to Kiriath-Arba (Hebron) in the Judean mountains south of Bethlehem (Ephrath). Recall also that on his return journey from Paddan-Aram, Jacob had passed through the mountains of Gilead and crossed the Jordan into Canaan somewhere near Peniel where he had wrestled with God (Genesis 32:22-32).

After entering Canaan, Jacob passed through Shechem where his sons perpetrated their horrible vengeance on the city after their prince raped Jacob's daughter Dinah (Genesis 34). Then God directed Jacob to return to Bethel (Luz) where he had dreamed of the stairway leading up to Heaven twenty years prior on his journey up to Paddan-Aram.

After God reiterated His renaming of Jacob as Israel, and His promise to give the land of Canaan to Jacob's descendants (Genesis 35:9-15). As Jacob's family continued their journey from Bethel, somewhere along the way to Bethlehem (Ephrath), Jacob's wife Rachel died giving birth to Jacob's youngest son Benjamin before Jacob finally returned to his father's dwelling place in Hebron (Genesis 35:16-27).

As we can see from this map, the place where Joseph's brothers were pasturing their father's livestock at Dothan was

Patriarchs in Canaan

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several days' journey north of Jacob's tents at Mamre. It is a testament to the starkness of Canaan that herdsmen needed to range so far to find adequate water and pasture for their animals.

18They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him. 19They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. 20Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. [בֹּר] bôr – pit, well, cistern] Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams." Genesis 37:18-20 (ESV)

It's only natural for us to condemn the petty jealousy of Joseph's brothers and the evil scheme they hatched to get rid of him. In our own self-righteousness, we might say to ourselves that we would never even dream of perpetrating something so heinous upon anyone, much less one of our own family. But remember that Jacob himself should bear some of the blame for this situation. After all, we are told in so many words (Genesis 37:3) that Israel favored Joseph over all his brothers. This was because Joseph and his younger brother Benjamin were the sons of Jacob's favorite wife Rachel. Small wonder then that Joseph's brothers despised him – especially after he recounted his dreams which clearly depicted them as Joseph's servants.

Furthermore, as we will later learn, Joseph and his brothers were all acting in accordance with God's pre-determined plan to rescue Jacob and his descendants the nation of Israel out of starvation. Their survival was essential for the fulfillment of God's ultimate plan of salvation for all mankind through Jesus of Nazareth – the descendant of Joseph's brother Judah. We have the benefit of hindsight and the illumination of God's Spirit to discern these facts, but Jacob and his family who were stuck living out the story moment-by-moment couldn't possibly foresee or understand God's grand scheme.

This is an important lesson for us too in our daily lives. Sometimes bad things happen to "good" people, and good things happen to "bad" people. When we see God allowing such things, we may become discouraged, frustrated or even angry with God. We might even be tempted to doubt God's love for His chosen and anointed children. But we can take heart in the words of King David.

1Of David.

***Fret not yourself because of evildoers;
be not envious of wrongdoers!***

***2For they will soon fade like the grass
and wither like the green herb.***

***3Trust in the LORD, and do good;
dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.***

***4Delight yourself in the LORD,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.***

***5Commit your way to the LORD;
trust in him, and he will act.***

***6He will bring forth your righteousness as the light,
and your justice as the noonday.***

***7Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him;
fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way,
over the man who carries out evil devices!***

***8Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath!
Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil.***

***9For the evildoers shall be cut off,
but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land.*** Psalm 37:1-9 (ESV)

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Before we move on, just a quick mention of the Hebrew בֹּר **bôr** in Genesis 37:20. Most English language translations render this as “pit” as the ESV does. But some translate it as “cistern.” Although the word can also mean “well,” this pit hewn out of the rock at Dothan did not contain any water – at least not on the day Joseph’s brothers threw him into it.

21But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.” 22And Reuben said to them, “Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him”—that he might rescue him out of their hand to restore him to his father. 23So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore. 24And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. Genesis 37:21-24 (ESV)

Just as we are tempted to condemn Joseph’s other brothers for hatching the scheme to kill him, we may be tempted to laud Reuben for dissuading them from killing him – albeit by trying to hoodwink them. But we need to remember that everyone involved was acting unknowingly to fulfill God’s plan of salvation in Christ for all mankind by using Joseph’s slavery in Egypt to deliver his family out of a coming famine.

So it is with us. When we are tempted to condemn ourselves for our failures or commend ourselves for our successes, we would do well to remember Jesus’s words to His disciples.

5I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. John 15:5 (ESV)

25Then they sat down to eat. And looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. 26Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? 27Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers listened to him. 28Then Midianite traders passed by. And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt. Genesis 37:25-28 (ESV)

Ya gotta love it. After stripping their brother of his special cloak and throwing him into a waterless pit where he would eventually die of thirst, Joseph’s brothers sat down casually to share a meal together. Then they saw the caravan of Ishmaelites, and Judah came up with a plan to not only get rid of their hated younger brother, but to make a little money on the side out of the deal. Then Judah rationalized the whole despicable plan by congratulating himself and his brothers for the “mercy” they were showing to their “**own flesh**.”

Genesis 37:25-28 is a confusing passage and the object of considerable scholarly debate because of its reference to Ishmaelites and Midianite traders along with Joseph’s brothers. This is a reminder of one of the weaknesses of human language. There is no way for us to discern grammatically from the text whether it was Midianites or Joseph’s brothers who drew Joseph up out of the pit or whether it was the Midianites or the Ishmaelites who then took Joseph down to Egypt.

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There are several ways that this passage has been interpreted by Old Testament scholars through the years. For those who may be interested in exploring further, a very good summary of these interpretations can be found at <https://hermeneutics.stackexchange.com/questions/19293/genesis-37-any-difference-between-ishmeelites-and-midianites>. A more accessible article on the subject can be found at <https://theisraelbible.com/the-mystery-of-josephs-sale/>

In the meantime, remember that Ishmaelites were descendants of Jacob's father Isaac's half-brother. Abraham was their father, but Ishmael's mother was Abraham's wife Sarah's Egyptian maidservant Hagar (Genesis 16). The Midianites were the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael's half-brother Midian who was the son of Abraham and Keturah – the wife Abraham took in his old age after Isaac's mother Sarah died (Genesis 25:1-2).

So now that we've been reminded of the connections and distinctions between the Israelites, Ishmaelites, and Midianites. What can we discern from this passage in Genesis 37:25-28? One school of thought is that the passage is using the terms Ishmaelites and Midianites interchangeably. Another way of interpreting the passage is that the two groups were traveling together with the Ishmaelites acting as hired animal drovers for the Midianite traders who bought Joseph from his brothers and then re-sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites who were traveling with them. It is also unclear whether the Midianites pulled Joseph out of the pit after Joseph's brother sold him to them, or whether Joseph's brothers pulled him up and handed him over. Still another interpretation is that Joseph was sold multiple times before he ended up in the service of Potiphar the Egyptian.

Before we move on, we need to briefly look at the price Joseph's brothers received when they sold him into slavery. There is much ado made about this specific number by Biblical nit pickers (like me). In fact, the Hebrew שֶׁקֶל **sheqel** doesn't appear in Genesis 37:28 at all. The Hebrew text literally reads כֶּסֶף בְּעֶשְׂרִים - **twenty of silver**. Of course, that immediately begs the question, twenty *what* of silver? English language translations are split between "shekels" as in the ESV and "pieces." Various pundits at various times have gotten a great deal of "air time" expounding upon their perceived significance of the price paid for Joseph and comparing it to the price Judas Iscariot exacted from the Jewish leaders to betray Jesus into their hands. In my own (always) humble opinion, most of these arguments are mere speculation and quite irrelevant to the larger message of God's Word. So, I'll leave the (other) pundits to their ruminations.

Of course, in the final analysis it doesn't really matter who did what to Joseph or for how much, so long as we keep in mind that God was working all these things together in fulfillment of His plan of salvation for all mankind – the Gospel of Jesus Christ – by placing Joseph in Egypt in preparation for rescuing Israel's family out of death from the coming famine. But we're getting ahead of ourselves again.

²⁹When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes ³⁰and returned to his brothers and said, "The boy is gone, and I, where shall I go?" Genesis 37:29-30 (ESV)

Unless Reuben was suffering from some sort of early-onset short-term memory impairment, these verses lend credence to the idea that the Midianite traders – not Joseph's brothers – pulled Joseph up out of the pit in culmination of the brothers' plan to get rid of him. Otherwise, it would seem a bit incongruous if Reuben was surprised to find Joseph gone when he returned to the pit into which they had cast him. Possibly, Reuben wasn't present when the other brothers handed Joseph over to the Midianites, and they just forgot to mention that little fact to Reuben when he returned.

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Before we applaud Reuben too strongly for his little scheme to help Joseph by deceiving his brothers – initially going along with their plan to get rid of him, but returning to rescue him later – notice Reuben’s main concern upon discovering that his scheme had gone awry, saying “**...I, where shall I go?**” Like most of us, Reuben was usually focused on his own perceived self-interest rather than the welfare of his brother. No wonder Jesus was so seemingly shocked when He met Nathaniel.

47b...**“Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!”** John 1:47b (ESV)

31Then they took Joseph’s robe and slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. 32And they sent the robe of many colors and brought it to their father and said, “This we have found; please identify whether it is your son’s robe or not.” 33And he identified it and said, “It is my son’s robe. A fierce animal has devoured him. Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.” 34Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. 35All his sons and all his daughters rose up 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 wept for him. Genesis 37:31-35 (ESV)

In his interpretation of Genesis 37, Rabbi Hezekiah ben Manoah

“...concludes that when the brothers discover Joseph is gone, they truly believe that a wild animal had devoured him. When they showed Jacob his bloodied coat and he reached this same conclusion, they weren’t crafting an elaborate lie; they genuinely thought their brother had met a violent end.” (Quoted from <https://theisraelbible.com/the-mystery-of-josephs-sale/>, October 21, 2025)

However, Rabbi ben Manoah’s interpretation apparently disregards Genesis 37:31. Clearly, Joseph’s brothers purposely stained Joseph’s special cloak with goat’s blood to deceive their father Jacob into thinking that Joseph had been killed by an animal. Why would they need to go to that trouble if they truly believed Joseph had been torn apart by a wild beast? Wouldn’t Joseph’s cloak have been torn and stained with Joseph’s blood during such an animal attack? Rabbi ben Manoah’s argument that Joseph’s brothers surprise at seeing Joseph alive year’s later supports the idea that they truly believed Joseph had been killed by a wild animal doesn’t stand up to scrutiny. When Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, they weren’t shocked to see him alive so much as they were by the prosperity and power Joseph enjoyed as an official of the Egyptian government rather than abject suffering in the bondage his brothers had sold him into years before. But once again, we’re getting ahead of ourselves.

In Genesis 37:34 we find the first mention in God’s Word of sackcloth (שַׂמְשֵׁן *śāq*). Wearing of sackcloth in place of the usual clothing and sprinkling ashes onto the head were traditional signs of mourning and repentance in ancient Hebrew society. Sackcloth is a roughly woven fabric made from roughly spun thread. In addition to being used to carry and store harvested grain, sackcloth was used as a sieve for filtering solids out of a liquid. We can well imagine that sackcloth was uncomfortable to wear – particular as a loincloth like Jacob did in mourning Joseph’s (presumed) death. Thus, as he wore it, Jacob was continually reminded of the loss of his favorite son.

Genesis 37:35 provides the first mention of Sheol (שְׁאוֹל *ś’ōl*) – the Hebrew word for the grave, the underworld or hell. שְׁאוֹל *ś’ōl* was thought to be the abode of the dead. Hebrew tradition considered שְׁאוֹל *ś’ōl* to be quite distinct and apart from Heaven – the eternal abode of God and His angels. Although Genesis 37:35 is the first mention of שְׁאוֹל *ś’ōl* in the Torah, the book of Job which many

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believe to be the oldest book of the Bible contains some eight mentions of **שְׂאוֹל** **š'ôl**. In general, **שְׂאוֹל** **š'ôl** is discussed throughout God's Word in a very negative light. It was considered a place of suffering and punishment rather than a place or state of eternal rest or unfettered joy. Notice that Jacob assumed that Joseph would be in **שְׂאוֹל** **š'ôl** when Jacob went down to him in mourning. Thus, we can infer that in ancient Hebrew tradition prior to God's giving of the Law of Moses it was assumed that all people went to **שְׂאוֹל** **š'ôl** when they died. It was only later that the concept of resurrection of the dead came into Hebrew philosophy and belief. Even then, the idea of resurrection into a more pleasant afterlife outside of **שְׂאוֹל** **š'ôl** was not universally accepted by Hebrew theologians.

For example, the Sadducee sect of the Jewish priesthood in Jesus' day did not believe in the resurrection of the dead to either **שְׂאוֹל** **š'ôl** or to Heaven. Thus, it was quite hypocritical of them to pose their little brainteaser to Jesus that we find in Matthew 22:23-28.

²³The same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection, and they asked him a question, ²⁴saying, “Teacher, Moses said, ‘If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.’ ²⁵Now there were seven brothers among us. The first married and died, and having no offspring left his wife to his brother. ²⁶So too the second and third, down to the seventh. ²⁷After them all, the woman died. ²⁸In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her.” Matthew 22:23-28 (ESV)

Jesus' response to them was both blunt and authoritative – so much so that the Sadducees who thought they had posed a riddle He couldn't answer were dumbfounded and didn't try to test Him again.

²⁹But Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. ³⁰For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. ³¹And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: ³²‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living.” ³³And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching. Matthew 22:29-33 (ESV)

³⁶Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard. Genesis 37:36 (ESV)

Eventually, Jacob's mourning would be turned to joy when he learned that Joseph was still living. But once again, we're getting ahead of ourselves.

Looking Ahead

Next time, we'll take a brief sojourn away from the story of Joseph to look at the story of Judah and his widowed daughter-in-law Tamar through whom God established the line of Judah's descendants which led to King David and eventually Jesus of Nazareth.