

## Malcolm's Monday Musings : 1 June 2026

Greetings.

I set out below the third of four main 'Musings' which focus on 'The early life of Joseph', as detailed in Genesis 37-41.

There we consider several more links in 'a chain of ten links which brought young Joseph from the home of a loving father in the land of Canaan to the very highest position open to him in the whole of the land of Egypt'.

As last week, here are three unconnected items to be going on with:

**1. *'Pilate said to them, "Behold the man!"', John 19. 5.***

'Pilate presents Jesus to the people with the words. "Behold the man!" This is most likely an allusion to 1 Sam. 9. 17, where the Lord presents Saul to Samuel with the same words (viz. "Behold the man"). Note, however, the element of irony: Saul is the king whom Israel should not have sought out, yet did, while Jesus is the king whom Israel should have sought out, yet didn't'.

(James Bejon, 'John 18–21 and Atonement Theory', page 10.)

**2. *'They read from the ... law of God clearly, gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading', Neh. 8. 8.***

'One of the reasons for the disinterest in expository preaching is surely that so many attempts at it prove lifeless, dull, and even thoroughly boring. I never cease to be amazed by the ingenuity of those who are capable of taking the powerful, life-changing text of Scripture and communicating it with all the passion of someone reading aloud from the Yellow Pages telephone directory!'

(Alistair Begg, 'Preaching for God's Glory', page 22.)

**3. *'That you grieve not, as the rest who have no hope', 1 Thess. 4. 13.***

'Our hope for heaven tempers our grief, but it doesn't erase it. When we grieve over someone who has died in Christ, we are sorrowing not for them but for ourselves. Our grief isn't a sign of weak faith, but of great love'.

(Billy Graham, 'The Journey', page 221.)

Happy reading.

Yours in our Lord Jesus,

Malcolm

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## THE EARLY LIFE OF JOSEPH

### Part 3: Genesis 37. 25-36

#### SCRIPTURE

Our single Bible reading consists of Genesis chapter 37, verses 31-36.

So they took Joseph's tunic, killed a kid of the goats, and dipped the tunic in the blood.

Then they sent the tunic of many colours, and they brought it to their father and said, 'We have found this. Do you know whether it is your son's tunic or not?'

And he recognized it and said, 'It is my son's tunic. A wild beast has devoured him. Without doubt Joseph is torn to pieces'.

Then Jacob rent his clothes, put sackcloth on his waist, and mourned for his son many days. And all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and he said, 'For I shall go down into the grave to my son in mourning'. Thus his father wept for him.

And the Midianites sold him into Egypt unto Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh's, and captain of the guard.

#### INTRODUCTION

We concluded Part 2 when considering the fourth link in the ten-link chain of providence which brings Joseph from the house of Jacob in Canaan to the very highest position open to him in all Egypt.

#### THE CHAIN OF TEN LINKS

Our Chain of Ten Links consists of ...

1. **The jealousy of Joseph's brothers.**<sup>1</sup>
2. **The anxiety of Joseph's father.**<sup>2</sup>
3. **The friendly inquiry of a certain man of Shechem.**<sup>3</sup>
4. **The timely intervention of Reuben and Judah.**<sup>4</sup>
5. **The journeying of certain Arabian traders.**<sup>5</sup>
6. **The domestic needs of Potiphar's household.**<sup>6</sup>
7. **The wickedness of Potiphar's wife.**<sup>7</sup>
8. **The injustice of Potiphar's decision.**<sup>8</sup>
9. **The falling from favour of Pharaoh's chief butler and chief baker.**<sup>9</sup>
10. **The memory of the chief butler.**<sup>10</sup>

To resume ...

#### **4. The timely intervention of Reuben and Judah.**<sup>11</sup>

In Part 2, we considered the role played by Reuben and we left off when watching Joseph's extremely callous and unfeeling brothers sit down to enjoy their meal while he languished helplessly in a dry water cistern. I closed by pointing out that it was just as well for his brothers that 'Joseph wasn't left to die of hunger in that cistern ... or they would all likely have died of hunger some twenty years later ... and a whole lot more people with them!'

At this point, enter ...

#### **(ii) Judah.**

In common with Reuben, Judah intervenes to save Joseph's life. But his underlying concern is very different from that of his older brother. For, whereas Reuben sincerely wishes to return Joseph safely to his father, Judah is as glad as any of the others to be rid of Joseph. He is as determined as they that Joseph's detestable dreams would never translate into reality.

But what gives Judah pause—what Judah baulks at—is killing someone whom he describes in his very short speech, not only once as ‘our flesh’ but also twice as ‘our brother’<sup>12</sup>—even though, as Judah knows well, Joseph is in truth only their half-brother.

### For sale: Joseph.

Yet, although Judah shows more respect than the majority of his brothers for their common and close relationship to Joseph, he certainly isn’t driven by any warm feelings of brotherly love for him. Indeed, he could see—and he suggested exploiting—a far more profitable method of achieving their common objective of seeing the back of Joseph once and for all. For, along with his brothers, Judah has spied an approaching caravan of foreign traders,<sup>13</sup> which gives him an idea of how they could avert the shedding of Joseph’s blood.

Judah, therefore, proposes to his brothers that, rather than leave Joseph to die of starvation and exposure, they sell him to the merchants. That way, as Judah points out, they would avoid the messy affair of murder, together with the necessity of concealing a brother’s blood—which blood would be regarded, as had once been the case with the blood of Abel, as crying to heaven for vengeance on account of the murder of a brother.<sup>14</sup>

‘Come, and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites’, was Judah’s proposal.

To Judah, it is not okay to kill their brother but it is okay to sell him into lifelong slavery.

Several years ago, I came across the following short letter printed in a magazine:<sup>15</sup>

‘The Minister of our church always calls the children up to the front of the church during the service to tell them a short story. One Sunday, after telling them the story of Joseph, he asked, ‘Now none of you would sell your little brother or sister, would you?’ Immediately, half a dozen heads shook vigorously—‘No’. Except for one little chap, who proclaimed rather loudly, ‘But I’ve got a cousin you can have’.

Alas, Judah isn’t as reluctant as that ‘little chap’ about selling his own brother!

Oh, I see, Judah: it is not okay to kill your brother but it is okay to sell him into slavery, right?

I think not! And neither, I guess, did Joseph. The evidence points to Joseph’s having felt very keenly the fact that his own flesh and blood are willing to do just that. For I note that, when, some twenty-two years later, he—then ‘lord of all Egypt’<sup>16</sup>—made himself known to his brothers, he right away identified himself as ‘Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt’.<sup>17</sup>

But I suspect that the very idea of selling Joseph into slavery held a strong appeal for Judah and his brothers. I recall their retort when Joseph had shared his first dream with them, ‘Will you indeed reign over us? Will you indeed rule over us?’<sup>18</sup> Well, what more fitting destiny, they doubtless felt, for someone who aspired to be a king and to exercise dominion over them, than—in the language of Psalm 105—for him to be ‘sold as a slave’.<sup>19</sup>

And the brothers would be twenty pieces of silver to the good as well, which seems to have been a fair price for a healthy seventeen-year-old slave. Certainly, it was the value which the law of Moses later fixed on a young man of anything between five and twenty years of age.<sup>20</sup>

In his brother’s eyes, for them to say goodbye to Joseph and his insufferable dreams for ever and to have some pocket-money to share among them—what more could any man ask? So, motion carried!

### Reuben returns.

It is clear that the brothers had settled the whole business in Reuben’s absence, possibly because they half suspected that he intended to rescue Joseph. Whether that was so or not, it is at this point that Reuben puts in a further brief appearance.

But, alas for Reuben—and for Joseph at the time—he is too late. For Reuben now returns to the empty cistern—and this time it really is empty. No water ... and no Joseph!<sup>21</sup>

Reuben is devastated. How can he—the oldest of the brothers—the one more responsible than any of the others for the safety of Joseph—the one who had earlier blotted his copybook badly with his father over Bilhah<sup>22</sup>—how can he return to face his father? ‘The lad is no more’, he cried, ‘and I, where shall I go?’

In his own eyes at the time, Reuben has failed and failed miserably. And yet, in terms of God's great plan and purpose, Reuben has played his part brilliantly—for at that very moment Joseph was safely *en route* to Egypt.

'Where shall I go?', Reuben asked. But, frankly, for you and me where Reuben goes is of no great moment or interest. Of far greater importance to us, in terms of God's grand design—and of the history of the world—is the question, 'where is Joseph going?' And Joseph is now safely on his way to Egypt and to the next-but-one link in the chain!

I say 'next-but-one', because, if we rush on to consider the sale of Joseph by the Midianites to Potiphar, we shall, you may have noticed, have bypassed another of the vital links—that which, I guess, I should then call, 'The Missing Link'. And it is to that link which we must now turn our attention. I refer to link number five ....

## 5. The journeying of certain Arabian traders.<sup>23</sup>

We have already noted that, while heartlessly tucking into their meal, Joseph's brothers had spied an approaching caravan of foreign traders. Scripture does not devote much space to them and yet, in that short space, we learn all we need to know.

First, we are told **who they were**. According to verses 25, 27 and 28 (and the first verse of chapter 39), they were 'Ishmaelites' and, according to verses 28 and 36, they were 'Midianites'.

But there is no inconsistency or contradiction,<sup>24</sup> for we know that the Ishmaelites and the Midianites were the descendants of two men born to a common father—to Abraham, that is ... for Ishmael was Abraham's son through Hagar<sup>25</sup> and Midian was Abraham's son through Keturah.<sup>26</sup>

We also know, from chapter 28, that Esau (another of Abraham's descendants, and the father of another tribe-cum-nation, Edom) married the daughter of Ishmael.<sup>27</sup>

We are aware, that is, that there was intermarriage between the various descendants of Abraham. And it is hardly surprising, therefore, that, over time, there should have been intermarriage between these two tribes—between the Ishmaelites and the Midianites—both of which are descended from Abraham.

And it is clear, not only from our passage but also from a passage in the Book of Judges, that the two tribes had indeed developed very close links and often joined together in common enterprises.

Chapters 6 to 8 of the Book of Judges record Gideon's famous victory over the Midianites—the great 'pitchers-torches-and-trumpets' victory, due in no small part to Gideon's legendary 300.

But, when, in chapter 8, Gideon urges the men of Israel, 'each of you .... give me the earrings from his spoil' (that is, when each man was required to donate the earrings that formed part of the spoil taken from the defeated Midianites), we are told, immediately and explicitly, that 'they had gold earrings, because they were Ishmaelites'.<sup>28</sup>

We know, therefore, that the Ishmaelites and the Midianites were joined together in a military project then, just as, in similar fashion now in Genesis 37, they were joined together in a business venture.

So that is who the Arabian traders were.

Second, we are told **where they have come from** and **what their business was**.

The traders came, we are told, 'from Gilead'.<sup>29</sup> Gilead was a lushly forested region across the Jordan, famed for its gums, its balms and its spices. You may recall the question once posed by Jeremiah, 'Is there no balm in Gilead?'<sup>30</sup>— although I suspect that some of us may owe our familiarity with that question more to an African/American spiritual song and to the singing of George Beverley Shea<sup>31</sup> than to the prophet Jeremiah! In any case, we know where the commercial traders came from.

Third, for the purpose of our story, of far greater importance to us than who they were, from where they came or their line of business, were three other matters; namely: (i) **their destination**; (ii) **the route they were following**; and (iii) **the timing of their business trip**.

(i) As far as their **destination** is concerned, it was, we are informed, 'Egypt'. Not that there is anything remarkable about that. The 'spices, balm and myrrh' carried by this particular caravan were all articles highly valued by the Egyptians, both for embalming their dead and for medicinal purposes. Egypt was the obvious market and, therefore, the obvious destination. And it's a good thing for us that it was!

(ii) But the **route** being followed by these men was perhaps a little surprising. I understand that—although there is a road which passes a short distance to the north of Dothan and which can get you from Gilead to Egypt—there is also, in fact, a far more prominent highway which comes across the Jordan near Beth-shean and which continues down to Hebron—and from there south-westward to Egypt.<sup>32</sup>

But evidently (and no doubt for very good—and very sound—reasons), this particular caravan chose to follow the lesser-used route—which brought them past Dothan. And, again, for whatever reason, it's a good thing for us that they did.

(iii) And what can I say about the **timing**? It hardly needs to be said that, had they passed that way a week earlier or a week later, Joseph would never have seen Egypt, Potiphar or Pharaoh! Surely, there is nothing for anyone to say about it, except to stand back in awe in the presence of a God whose clock always—but always—keeps perfect time. If you are ever tempted to doubt it, I suggest that you just ask Joseph—or David<sup>33</sup> or Mordecai for that matter!<sup>34</sup>

And as I watch the company of Arabian traders disappear over the horizon in the general direction of Egypt, I know that they will be travelling through a long stretch of land from which Joseph will be able to see in the distance the heights of Hebron,<sup>35</sup> where, oblivious to all that has happened, his father anxiously awaits his return.

### **The unseen hand.**

But, as I watch the caravan disappear over the horizon, I marvel afresh at how my God's unseen hand manages to weave so many seemingly trivial, accidental and unrelated events into the tapestry of His purpose and will. And I marvel afresh at His uncanny knack of working all things for the good of those who love Him, which, for shorthand, we call His good providence.

The very smallest details of Joseph's experiences are crying out to us that, in all the hustle and bustle of everyday life, our God is in control even when events seem not to be.

### **'Back at the ranch'.**

But, before we follow the traders—and Joseph—to Egypt (and Joseph, at least, to Potiphar's house), you and I shall need to stay around in Canaan for a short time to watch events unfold back at Jacob's house, the account of which occupies the closing section of Genesis 37.

Well, we have to give it to them; Joseph's brothers were nothing if not resourceful. And to forestall any awkward and penetrating questions from their father when they returned home without Joseph, they concocted a clever ruse to deceive him.

As far as the narrative goes, they don't actually lie to the old man—they see to it that they don't need to. But what they did was as bad as if they had lied—if not worse. They simply faked the evidence and left him to draw his own conclusions.

And it seems that, rather than confront him themselves with Joseph's blood-stained tunic—and just possibly rouse some suspicions in his mind—they 'send' the tunic on ahead of them, presumably by the hand of some servant or servants. They then present it themselves to Jacob, making out that they had stumbled across it out in some field in its present condition and then (rather heartlessly, I feel) invite him to identify the tunic as his son's if he were able. Oh, yes, he was able alright!

### **Jacob's grief and tears.**

If we ignore the words supplied by our translators to make up the sense, Jacob's instant response was, 'My son's tunic!'<sup>36</sup> To some extent, the conclusion to which the aged patriarch jumped is understandable: 'My son's tunic. A wild beast has devoured him. Without doubt Joseph is torn to pieces'—for, as we noted in Part 2, there were many wild beasts—particularly lions and wolves<sup>37</sup> (and also bears<sup>38</sup>)—in the region of Canaan through which Joseph had travelled ... through which, please note, Joseph had been 'sent' ... and 'sent' by whom, pray? 'Sent' by the same old man who now 'rent' ('tore') his clothes—even as he supposed some wild beast had 'torn' his young son's body.

I suppose the brothers had little choice but to do something of this kind to cover up their evil deed and yet there is something heartless and cruel about the way in which they drive their aged father to hold himself ultimately responsible for his son's death—responsible in that (i) he had sent him such a long distance, (ii) he had sent him to such a dangerous place, (iii) he had sent him through such dangerous terrain and (iv) he had sent him alone.

He—Jacob—had lost his beloved Rachel only a few years before and now he has lost her firstborn son ... and this was all his own fault!

I guess that, had Jacob been able to control his grief (and who can blame him that he couldn't?), he might have been rather puzzled that the tunic itself was not torn (unlike—apparently—its one-time occupant), only soaked in blood. But Jacob was in no state for such clearheaded thinking. The light had gone out for him.<sup>39</sup>

Small wonder that Jacob proved utterly inconsolable: 'All his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted'. How hollow—how hypocritical—to his sons must have seemed their attempts to console their father!

And there we leave Jacob, with torn garments, clothed in sackcloth (the first recorded instance of such in our Bibles<sup>40</sup>) and with tears coursing down his wizened face, as he 'wept' for Joseph.<sup>41</sup>

But please remember that, while Jacob sat in Hebron wailing, there sat a God in heaven who was working—working, through these very events, to bring the most marvellous blessing to Jacob and his family and, through them, to the entire world (of Jacob's day and ours).

### Linking Genesis 37 with Genesis 45: false and true evidence.

And I love to connect, and contrast, this incident at the end of chapter 37 with the incident at the end of chapter 45. Here, Joseph's brothers produce (i) false evidence (Joseph's tunic) to convince Jacob that Joseph is dead.<sup>42</sup> There, Joseph's brothers produce (ii) true and incontrovertible evidence (the Egyptian wagons) to convince Jacob that Joseph was very much alive.<sup>43</sup>

In the first case, Jacob responds, 'Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces ... I will go down into the grave to my son'; in the second case, Jacob responds, 'Joseph my son is yet alive; I will go and see him before I die'.

And yet, there is more that must be said about this very moving section.

### Linking Genesis 37 with Genesis 27: kids of the goats (1).

First, it is probably impossible to miss the irony of the situation.

For is not this the very same Jacob, who, back in chapter 27, deceived his own father Isaac by the skilful use of kids of goats which had been slain?<sup>44</sup> To that extent, Jacob was only reaping what he had sown ... and the man who had once deceived his own father with the skins of goat kids, is now himself deceived by his own sons with the blood of a goat kid.<sup>45</sup>

### Linking Genesis 37 with Genesis 38: kids of the goats (2).

Separately, it is not difficult to spot the fascinating connection between events in this section and some of the events in the chapter immediately following, namely, in chapter 38—which relates the story of Judah and Tamar<sup>46</sup> and which might well be titled, I guess, 'The Case of the Vanishing Prostitute'.<sup>47</sup> In that chapter also we have an instance of 'the deceiver's being deceived'.

Consider two points of contact between chapters 37 and 38.

(i) Both chapters culminate in an episode where individuals are asked to identify objects linked, in one way or another, to goats.

Chapter 37 ends with a garment (Joseph's tunic) dipped in the blood of a slaughtered goat kid.<sup>48</sup>

In chapter 38, Judah offers to pay Tamar—posing at the time as a pagan religious prostitute<sup>49</sup>—a goat kid for her services.<sup>50</sup>

### Linking Genesis 37 with Genesis 38: evidence to be examined.

(ii) In chapter 37, Jacob is asked to 'know' (to 'recognize', to 'examine') the bloodstained garment of Joseph.

In chapter 38, Judah is asked to 'know' (to 'recognize', to 'examine'—the same word as in chapter 37) the personal insignia he had given in pledge to Tamar ... given against later full payment of the goat kid.

The parallel between the two passages is quite striking; literally translated, the passages read:

(a) 'And they sent...and said.... Examine.... and he examined, and said ...'.<sup>51</sup>

(b) 'And she sent...saying.... Examine.... and Judah examined, and said ...'.<sup>52</sup>

But, whereas the set of 'evidence' in chapter 37 (Joseph's blood-stained tunic) was, of course, intended to deceive and to cover up the truth, the set of 'evidence' in chapter 38 (Judah's personal insignia) was intended to expose and to uncover the truth.

And so, Judah, who played no small part in deceiving his father in chapter 37, is himself deceived by his daughter-in-law in chapter 38.<sup>53</sup>

In summary, whether the closing section of chapter 37 is linked (i) backwards to chapter 27 or (ii) forwards to chapter 38, it provides the basis for illustrating a deceiver being deceived!

Having then taken a detour for a short time to observe these important developments at Jacob's house in Canaan, we can now re-join the Arabian caravan—and Joseph—*en route* to Egypt, and, in Joseph's case at least, to Potiphar's house.

And so, to link number 6 ...

## 6. The domestic needs of Potiphar's household.<sup>54</sup>

### Potiphar: 'an officer of Pharaoh'.

The identical description of Potiphar as 'an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard' in both the last verse of chapter 37 and the first verse of chapter 39, serves to pick up the story of Joseph again, following the separate—although, as we have seen, the related—story of Judah and Tamar in chapter 38.

The fact that the word translated 'officer' in both verses is rendered 'eunuch' in some later passages of the Old Testament has, in the past, led some to conclude that Potiphar was himself a eunuch. But we now know that, in the early Ancient Near East, this particular word refers simply to a high-ranking court official, rather than to a man who has been castrated.<sup>55</sup>

It was not until the days of the Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian empires that kings began to employ eunuchs for certain key tasks, including that of supervising the royal harem—as they did, for example, in the book of Esther.<sup>56</sup>

Contrary, then, to the claims of some, Potiphar was not a eunuch. Indeed, I note in passing that (as Joseph was later to find to his cost) Potiphar had a wife. The word 'officer' is simply telling us that Potiphar held a very high position in the court of Pharaoh.

### Potiphar: 'captain of the guard'.

And the following expression tells us what that position was. Potiphar was 'captain of the guard'.

He was, literally translated, 'chief of the slaughterers'; he was 'chief of the executioners'.<sup>57</sup> Potiphar was the commanding officer of the elite royal palace guard, which would, among other duties, execute anyone the king didn't like.<sup>58</sup> Only an officer as close to the palace as Potiphar would have had the authority later to throw Joseph into that prison-house where the King's prisoners were kept.<sup>59</sup>

And, with my eye on later events, I smile when I read that it was Potiphar who held this particular office. For an inscription which comes from the tomb of an Egyptian Prime Minister of a somewhat later date, says of the Prime Minister that 'it is he who gathers the troops moving in attendance upon the king'.<sup>60</sup> In other words, the Prime Minister was in supreme command of the royal palace guard.

This means, of course, that later, as Prime Minister of Egypt, Joseph would have exercised direct and personal authority over Potiphar. Now that must have been interesting, not least, I guess, for Mrs Potiphar!

Well, that's what Potiphar was—and we all know what Joseph was!

### Joseph: the slave.

Joseph was a slave, a point which the Holy Spirit emphasizes for us by describing Joseph's situation from two standpoints. The last verse of chapter 37 tells us that he was 'sold' to Potiphar and the first verse of chapter 39 tells us that he was 'bought' by Potiphar. And, although the opening section of chapter 39 doesn't actually use the word 'slave', Potiphar's wife does, when she later accuses Joseph to Potiphar.<sup>61</sup>

Yes, Joseph was, as Psalm 105 expresses it, 'sold as a slave'.<sup>62</sup> And yet, for all that, he was destined to rise to become, as he expresses it himself in chapter 45, 'lord of all Egypt'.<sup>63</sup> Yes, this is the story of a bondservant who rises to become lord!

Does that not ring some bells with you?

For we know Someone, who, very literally, 'rose' to become Lord—and that, not, as Joseph, 'of all Egypt' but, as the apostle Peter expresses it in the house of Cornelius, to become 'Lord of all'—of absolutely all.<sup>64</sup>

And we remember that He, our Lord Jesus, wasn't 'sold' as a bondservant; He chose to become a bondservant, willingly 'taking' on Himself, as the apostle Paul says in Philipians 2, 'the form of a bondservant'.<sup>65</sup> What matchless grace!<sup>66</sup>

I can't help wondering how young Joseph felt about his present predicament.

### From dreams to a nightmare.

For the change from holding the first place—both in his father's heart and in his father's home—to being sold as a slave in a foreign land must have been nothing short of a nightmare<sup>67</sup> for Joseph. And it was not in just any foreign land but in Egypt. And he would most likely have been told by his father (i) of how his grandfather Isaac had been expressly forbidden by God to go down into Egypt<sup>68</sup> and (ii) of his great-grandfather's most unhappy experiences there.<sup>69</sup>

And now here he is ... in Egypt.

And, please remember, when Joseph was sold into Egypt:

1. He was only 17 years of age.
2. He had no money.
3. He had neither friend nor acquaintance in the whole land.
4. He had no knowledge of the language spoken there.  
*(We recall that his brothers later needed an interpreter to understand everything and anything which Joseph said to them in Egyptian, Gen. 42. 23.)*
5. He had no trade or occupation which the Egyptians respected.  
*(Joseph had been brought up as a shepherd<sup>70</sup> and 'every shepherd' was—as Joseph himself pointed out to his brothers later—'an abomination to the Egyptians'.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, I suspect that, when Joseph pointed out that fact to his brothers, he may well have been speaking from his own bitter experience over twenty years before.)*

We do well to remember the words of Joseph's brothers in chapter 37 (to which I draw attention on page 6 of Part 2), 'We shall see what will become of his dreams'.<sup>72</sup> I wonder ... did Joseph now ask himself the question, 'what will become of my dreams?—what price my dreams now?'

And, although Joseph doesn't yet know it, courtesy of Potiphar's wife, things are going to get even worse for him before chapter 39 is out.

### **The unseen hand again.**

But, whether or not Joseph wondered what would ever become of his dreams, I wonder what were the chances of Joseph's ending up in the house of Potiphar ... of his ending up in what was to prove the only house in all Egypt which would preserve our chain intact.

Scholars assure us that slavery flourished in Egypt at the time and that the number of slaves being brought from Canaan and Syria was growing constantly.<sup>73</sup> Scholars have no basis on which to form a firm estimate of the total number of slaves in Egypt. We do know, however, that, about this period, one Egyptian official recorded over 40 slaves in his personal possession<sup>74</sup> and that one Egyptian household owned no less than 79 slaves, at least 45 of whom came from the same part of the world as Joseph.<sup>75</sup> We can be certain, therefore, that there were a lot of slaves in Egypt!

Nor do scholars have any basis on which to estimate the number of households which owned slaves at the time. But we do know, from a papyrus from this era, that many Egyptian officials of wealth and high standing did own slaves.<sup>76</sup> Potiphar was, then, just one among very many.

I understand that there is no evidence that, at this time, there were any markets for the selling of slaves. The evidence points rather to individual dealers approaching their intended customers directly.<sup>77</sup>

Pulling all this information together, we can take it that the odds against this particular Hebrew young man's being sold into the home of Potiphar—one of the most responsible officers in Pharaoh's administration—are simply astronomical.

But, against all the odds, our Ishmaelite trader friends 'just happened' to sell Joseph into that one house in all of Egypt which was to forge an absolutely essential link in the chain of God's providence.

How does God do things like this, without over-riding anyone's freedom in the process? How is it that He works behind the scenes, accomplishing unseen (but unerringly) His loving and gracious purpose for the good of those who love Him?

Frankly, I have no idea how. But I am certainly glad that He does!

### **TO BE CONCLUDED**

God willing, in next week's 'Musings', we shall consider the remaining four links in the chain of divine providence which propelled Joseph to the highest position open to him in the whole of the land of Egypt.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gen. 37. 1-11.

<sup>2</sup> Gen. 37. 12-14.

<sup>3</sup> Gen. 37. 15-17

<sup>4</sup> Gen. 37. 18-24; 26-27.

<sup>5</sup> Gen. 37. 25, 28.

<sup>6</sup> Gen. 37. 36; 39. 1-6.

<sup>7</sup> Gen. 39. 7-18.

<sup>8</sup> Gen. 39. 19-23.

<sup>9</sup> Gen. 40. 1-4.

<sup>10</sup> Gen. 40. 20-23; 41. 9-13.

<sup>11</sup> Gen. 37. 18-24; 26-27.

<sup>12</sup> Gen. 37. 26-27.

<sup>13</sup> 'They lifted up their eyes and looked, and, behold, a company of Ishmeelites ...', Gen. 37. 25.

<sup>14</sup> Gen. 4. 10. Compare Ezek. 24. 7-8; Isa. 26. 21; Job 16. 18.

<sup>15</sup> Readers Digest.

<sup>16</sup> Gen. 45. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Gen. 45. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Gen. 37. 8.

<sup>19</sup> Psa. 105. 17.

<sup>20</sup> Lev. 27. 5. 'The price of twenty shekels of silver paid for Joseph in Gen. 37. 28 is the correct average price for a slave in about the eighteenth-century BC: earlier than this, slaves were cheaper (average, ten to fifteen shekels), and later they became steadily dearer ... in the first millennium BC, the general price rose to 50 shekels and even to go or 120 shekels by Persian times', K. A. Kitchen, '*Ancient Orient And Old Testament*', pages 52-53. See also, I. Mendelsohn, '*Slavery in the Ancient Near East*', pages 117-155, and K. A. Kitchen, '*The New Bible Dictionary*', reprint of 1967, article 'Slave, Slavery', pages 1195-1196.

<sup>21</sup> Gen. 37. 29.

<sup>22</sup> Gen. 35. 22; 49. 4; 1 Chron. 5. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Gen. 37. 25-28.

<sup>24</sup> We certainly need no weird and wonderful Document Hypothesis of the Pentateuch, with its imaginary J, E, P, D sources, to explain the variation. For critiques of the Graf-Wellhausen theory, see (i) Umberto Cassuto, '*The Document Hypothesis and the Composition of the Pentateuch*', translation, 2005, and (ii) [http://helpmewithbiblestudy.org/5system\\_moses/notes/dh6.aspx](http://helpmewithbiblestudy.org/5system_moses/notes/dh6.aspx).

<sup>25</sup> Gen. 16. 15. One hundred and fifty years had passed since Ishmael's dismissal from his father's house—a period sufficient for his descendants to have grown through marriage into a respectable tribe.

<sup>26</sup> Gen. 25. 2.

<sup>27</sup> Gen. 28. 9.

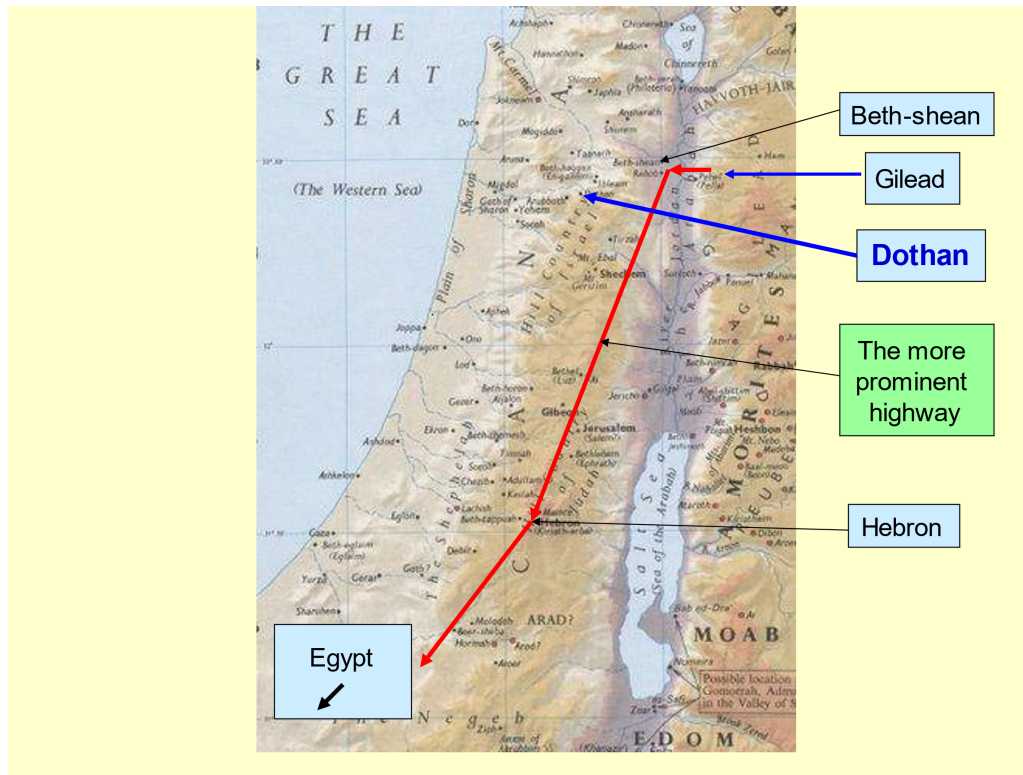
28 Judg. 8. 24.

29 Gen. 37. 25.

30 Jer. 8. 22.

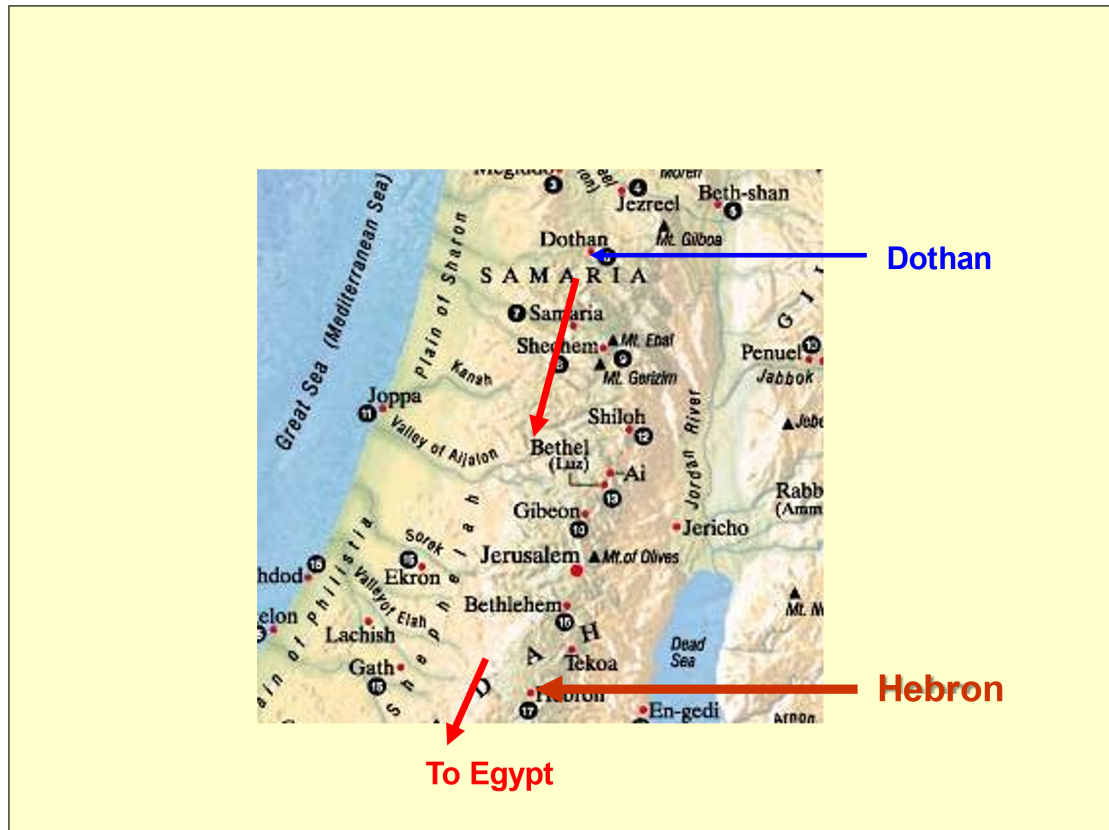
31 'There is a balm in Gilead'—available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhPMYQgXFME&t=504s>.

32



33 'As Saul and his men were closing in on David and his men to capture them, a messenger came to Saul, saying, "Hurry and come"', 1 Sam. 23. 26-27.

34 'On that night the king could not sleep', Esther 6. 1 and the sequel.



<sup>36</sup> Gen. 37. 33.

<sup>37</sup> Gen. 49. 9, 27.

<sup>38</sup> For evidence of bears still in the land in later times, see 1 Sam. 17. 34, 37; 2 Sam. 17. 8; Prov. 17. 12; 28. 15; Lam. 3. 10; Hos. 13. 8; Amos 5. 19.

<sup>39</sup> Jacob seemed to have handled the death of Deborah (Gen. 35. 8) and even that of Rachel (Gen. 35. 16-19) with reasonable composure but the death of Joseph devastated him.

<sup>40</sup> Reuben had torn his clothes, Gen. 37. 29, but had not put sackcloth on his loins.

<sup>41</sup> Gen. 37. 35

<sup>42</sup> Gen. 37. 31-35.

<sup>43</sup> Gen. 45. 25-28.

<sup>44</sup> Gen. 27. 9, 16, 22-23.

<sup>45</sup> 'They took Joseph's coat, and killed a kid of the goats, and dipped the coat in the blood', Gen. 37. 31.

<sup>46</sup> Tamar's plan resembles that of Jacob and Rebekah (recorded in chapter 27). Through a disguise she obtained that which the patriarch should have rightfully given. According to Hittite law, when no brother-in-law existed to fulfil the levirate duty, the father-in-law was responsible for it. In that sense, Tamar was 'more righteous' than Judah. Compare Leon Wood, 'Survey of Israel's History', page 76.

<sup>47</sup> Genesis 38 is concerned with the survival of the line of one of Jacob's sons and with the continuation of the royal, messianic line. The chapters either side (chapters 37 and 39) are concerned with the survival of the whole clan through a time of severe famine.

<sup>48</sup> Gen. 37. 31.

<sup>49</sup> The word translated ‘prostitute/harlot’ in Gen. 38. 21, 22 differs from the ordinary word for ‘prostitute/harlot’. The word here (הַזְדִּיקָ) occurs only here and in Deut. 23. 17 and Hos. 4. 14, and indicates a ‘shrine/temple/religious prostitute’; see (i) ‘*The New Brown, Driver and Briggs Lexicon*’, page 873b (number 6945), (ii) ‘*The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*’, Moody, Volume 2, page 788, article *qādēsh*, and, especially, ‘*New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*’, Volume 3, page 886 (number 7727: 4).

<sup>50</sup> ‘He said, I will send you a kid of the goats from the flock’, Gen. 38. 17. This may well have been the common payment for what Tamar was offering. She was posing as a cultic prostitute; in classical antiquity, the goat was sacred to ‘the goddess of love’, whether connected with an occasional act or that of a professional. Compare Hosea 4. 14; Deut. 23. 18.

<sup>51</sup> Gen. 37. 32–33.

<sup>52</sup> Gen. 38. 25–26. The fact that initially Judah wanted Tamar executed for a sin he himself has also committed proves that he was less interested in punishing the guilty as a matter of principle than in punishing whoever was caught.

<sup>53</sup> Compare, ‘The Holy One blessed be He said to Judah: “You deceived your father with a goat kid; as you live, Tamar will deceive you with a goat kid” ... The Holy One blessed be He said to Judah: “You said to your father: ‘Identify, please’; as you live, Tamar will say to you: ‘Identify, please’”’, ‘*Bereshit Rabbah*’ (a Talmudic-era Midrash on Genesis), chapter 85—accessible, with English translation, at ...

[https://www.sefaria.org/Bereshit\\_Rabbah.85.10?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Bereshit_Rabbah.85.10?lang=bi)  
and [https://www.sefaria.org/Bereshit\\_Rabbah.85.11?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en..](https://www.sefaria.org/Bereshit_Rabbah.85.11?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en..)

<sup>54</sup> Gen. 37. 36; 39. 1-6.

<sup>55</sup> ‘The Hebrew word is clearly related to the name of the Akkadian royal official (2 Kings 18. 17). Accordingly, *sārīs* is not to be translated “eunuch” unless context or other evidence demands it. Thus, since thorough study fails to uncover conclusive evidence for the employment of eunuchs as officials in ancient Egypt, the reason why the Egyptian officers in the Joseph narrative were called by this term is probably that in all cases ... these men were special officials of Pharaoh’, ‘*The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*’, Moody, Volume 2, pages 634-635, article *sārīs* (number 1545). Compare ‘*New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*’, Volume 3, pages 288-295 (number 6247), and J. Schneider, the Kittell/Friedrich ‘*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*’, Volume II, page 766.

<sup>56</sup> Esther 2. 3, 14; cf. Esther 1. 10, 12, 15; 2. 15, 21; 4. 4, 5; 6. 2, 14; 7. 9; Dan 1. 3, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 18.

‘Potiphar: was he an “officer” or “eunuch” of Pharaoh? The word used of Potiphar in Genesis (37. 36; 39. 1; 40. 2, 7) is *sārīs* which elsewhere in the Old Testament usually means “eunuch”. This meaning creates difficulties in Genesis; not only was Potiphar a married man (Gen 39. 1), but eunuchs were not customary in ancient Egypt. The answer to this question is a simple one. Hebrew *sārīs* is probably a loanword from the Akkadian (Assyro-Babylonian) *ša-rēš-šarri* or *ša-rēši* which itself shows a change of meaning during the time that it was in use. Thus, in the second millennium BC, *ša-rēši* usually meant simply “courtier”, “official”, but by the first millennium BC it had come to mean specifically “eunuch”. This is a valuable hint, for the same diachronic restriction of meaning can be seen to affect Hebrew *sārīs*. In the Joseph-story in Genesis, the early, general meaning of “official”, “courtier”, suits the context perfectly, and is also, therefore, a genuinely early usage preserved from the early second millennium BC. But all the other examples of *sārīs* in the Old Testament belong to books originating in the first millennium BC (Isaiah, Kings, Jeremiah, Daniel, Esther) and so they naturally show the later, narrower meaning of *sārīs*. The parallel development in meaning of these two related terms is not unique. In both Egypt and Mesopotamia, other and wholly unrelated words for “official”, “courtier” also show the same change of meaning. The old Egyptian word *sr*, “official”, became *siūr*, “eunuch”, in Coptic, while in Mesopotamia in the early second millennium BC the term *girsequm*, “eunuch”, had earlier meant “courtier”, K. A. Kitchen, *ibid*, pages 165-166.

In later days, kings employed eunuchs in any high position which might have tempted them to stage a military coup, to do away with the existing monarch, and to establish a dynasty of their own. But if you cannot father a son, you cannot establish a dynasty! And kings in those later ancient empires were taking no chances!

<sup>57</sup> 'Keil and Delitzsch: Commentary on the Old Testament', Volume 1, page 338; H. E. Ryle, 'Genesis: The Cambridge Bible', page 358.

<sup>58</sup> See I. Cornelius, 'New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis', Volume 2, page 337 (number 3184).

<sup>59</sup> Gen. 39. 20.

<sup>60</sup> 'It is he who gathers the troops, moving in attendance upon the king, in journeying northward or southward', J. H. Breasted, 'Ancient Records of Egypt', Volume 2, page 278. The quotation comes from the tomb of Rekhmire, a vizier under Thutmose III and Amenhotep II.

<sup>61</sup> Gen 39. 17, 19.

<sup>62</sup> Psa. 105. 17.

<sup>63</sup> Gen. 45. 9.

<sup>64</sup> Acts 10. 36.

<sup>65</sup> Phil. 2. 7.

<sup>66</sup> 2 Cor. 8. 9.

<sup>67</sup> In stark contrast to his earlier dreams!

<sup>68</sup> Gen. 26. 2.

<sup>69</sup> Gen. 12. 10-20.

<sup>70</sup> Gen. 37. 2.

<sup>71</sup> Gen. 46. 34.

<sup>72</sup> Gen. 37. 20.

<sup>73</sup> 'These events in the life of Joseph should be dated to the great Middle Kingdom period of Egyptian history ... It is important to note that during the Middle Kingdom, slavery as an institution of society flourished in Egypt. Evidence from Egyptian texts, indicates that at this time in Egypt's history, the number of Syro-Palestinian slaves in bondage in the Nile Valley was growing constantly', Charles Aling, 'Joseph in Egypt', Bible and Spade 15. 2 (2002).

<sup>74</sup> J. Dunn, 'Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Egypt', accessed at [www.touregypt.net/featurestories/slaves.htm](http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/slaves.htm).

<sup>75</sup> Joseph was sold into the right house, yet he was far from the only Semitic (a descriptive term for several peoples of the Middle East, mainly Canaan and Syria) slave on offer.

'Joseph was but one of many young Semites who became servants in Egyptian households between 1900 and 1600 B.C. Papyrus Brooklyn 35.1446, part of a prison-register, bears on its reverse a list of 79 servants in an Egyptian household around 1740 B.C. of whom at least 45 were not Egyptians but 'Asiatics', i.e. Semites like Joseph. Many of these have good North-eastern Semitic names linguistically related to those of Jacob, Issachar, Asher, Job (Ayyabum) and Menahem. Some were 'domestics' (hry-pr) just like Joseph in Genesis 39. 2 ('in the house')', K. A. Kitchen, 'The New Bible Dictionary', reprint of 1967, article 'Joseph', page 658.

<sup>76</sup> 'A papyrus from the Middle Kingdom (lists) slaves with names, nationality and titles or jobs held by these slaves. The list contains 95 entries. Of the 95 slaves listed, about 30 can be identified as non-Egyptian, either by their non-Egyptian names or by the designation "name", meaning an Asiatic ... Here we have evidence that officials of wealth and standing could own slaves. The Potiphar of Genesis must have been such a man', Charles Aling, *ibid.*—referring to W. C. Hayes, 'A Papyrus of the Late Middle Kingdom in the Brooklyn Museum', 1972.

<sup>77</sup> 'Slavery was a key component of state economy during Egypt's New Kingdom, with extensive evidence for the widespread kidnapping of foreigners as captives for the benefit of temples and other state institutions. Despite this, there is only limited evidence for the sale of slaves, and no evidence for the existence of dedicated slave markets of the type found in Classical Greece and Rome', N. Nielsen, '*Where were the Slave Markets*', ZÄS 2025; 152(1): 51–57—accessed at <https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.1515/zaes-2024-0006/html>.

'Though not an uncommon business in ancient Egypt, information about slave trading is rare. There appears to have been no public market for slaves. Rather, individual dealers seem to have approached their customers personally. The transaction was evidenced by commercial documents, executed before officials or a local council, that contained clauses usually used in the sale of valuable commodities. One inscription that records the sale of land, together with thirty-five slaves (men and women), appears to infer that a special register of slaves was held by administrators', J. Dunn, *ibid*.