

# Joseph

## Where does he fit in the bible story?

God's story is told through his relationship with individuals – Adam, Eve, & Noah are some of the earliest examples – but this really takes shape in God's call to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3).

God's call is always to place and to people, and Abraham's call begins the story of God's invitation to his ancient people, the Jews, to witness to the whole world his love, compassion and grace.

**Joseph** is the key figure in the 4<sup>th</sup> generation of this story:

Abraham had 2 sons: Ishmael & Isaac

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Isaac had 2 sons: Esau & Jacob

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Jacob had ... wait for it ... 12 sons!

These 12 sons were the ancestors of the 12 tribes  
that bear their names throughout the Old Testament:

Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, **Joseph**, Benjamin, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher

Favouritism played a negative role in this family in each generation, and Jacob was no exception. He adored his second wife, Rachel – and she was the mother of Joseph and Benjamin.

You can't fail to notice how he favours those 2 lads over their step-brothers. You'll also notice that Joseph has a soft spot for Benjamin, because of their mother (Genesis 43:29, 34).

It's also worth remembering that Jacob is renamed Israel after he wrestles with God (Genesis 32)

## Joseph's Story in a nutshell

### Genesis

### What happens

37

Joseph, aged 17, given a 'coat of many sleeves' by his father, begins to arouse his brothers' anger. This is made worse by his dreams, in which his family bow to him.

- 37 Joseph is sold by his brothers to slavers, who take him to Egypt and sell him to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials.
- 39 Potiphar's wife takes a shine to Joseph and seeks to seduce him. When Joseph refuses, she falsely accuses him and he is imprisoned. But even now, God prospers Joseph, who finds favour with the prison warden.
- 40 Joseph correctly interprets the dreams of two fellow prisoners.
- 41 When Pharaoh has a dream which cannot be interpreted, one of those fellow prisoners remembers Joseph. Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dream and is made 'Grand Vizier' of all Egypt, with responsibility for preparing for the famine predicted in Pharaoh's dream.
- 42 Famine hits Canaan, so Joseph's brothers (except Benjamin) go down to Egypt to buy food. Joseph accuses them of being spies, and insists that Benjamin be brought to him. One brother stays as a hostage, the others are sent back. Each discovers their payment for the food they have bought still in their baggage.
- 43 The brothers return to Egypt with Benjamin.
- 44 Joseph again sends the brothers away with food and their money, and has his own silver cup hidden in Benjamin's sack. They are then arrested and brought back to Joseph. The brothers plead for mercy for their younger brother.
- 45 Unable to contain himself, Joseph reveals who he is, and calms his brothers' fears that he intends them harm.
- 46 - 47 Israel (Jacob) moves to live in Egypt with his family.
- 48 - 49 Israel blesses Joseph's sons, & his own sons, and dies.
- 50 Joseph sums up his life in the words, 'God intended it for good'.

We encourage you to read the full story in Genesis 37-50 in your bibles. You may also like to read it in a more narrative form, in Paul's own retelling printed below.

# Genesis 37 – 50

## 37

Jacob, now known as Israel, settled in Canaan, his father's country.

This is the story of Joseph.

At the age of 17, Joseph was a tell-tale, never missing an opportunity to paint his half-brothers in a poor light to their father. Not surprisingly, there was little love lost between them.

The problem was that Joseph had been born to Israel when he was an old man, and Israel made no attempt to disguise the fact that Joseph was his favourite. In fact, he showered Joseph with gifts, including a fabulous robe, the very sight of which so inflamed his half-brothers' hatred that they could barely bring themselves to speak to him.

'Guess what I dreamed last night?' Joseph asked them one day, either oblivious to their growing resentment, or feeling that his position as Daddy's blue-eyed boy meant he could act as he pleased. 'We were all out in the fields harvesting, when suddenly my bundle of corn stood up and all yours bowed down to it! What do you make of that?'

'Dream on!' they spat back. 'Do you really believe anything in this world would ever make us bow down to you, you stuck-up little brat?' And their hatred burned hotter than ever.

Joseph had another dream, but once again lacked the wisdom to keep it to himself. 'Guess what? I had another dream last night. This time the sun, the moon and eleven stars were all bowing down to me.'

For once, even his father got angry with him. 'Stop this nonsense,' he said. 'Do you really think your mother and I, and all your brothers, are ever going to bow down to *you*?' However, while his brothers loathed Joseph all the more, Israel, who knew all too well how significant dreams can be, never forgot what Joseph had said.

Some time later, Israel sent Joseph to check up on his brothers, who had taken the family's herds to find fresh pasture. 'Come back and tell me how they're getting on.'

But when Joseph arrived where his brothers were supposed to be, he couldn't find any sign of them. Asking around, he found a local who told him, 'They were here, but they've moved on. I heard them talking about going to Dothan.'

Sure enough, that's where Joseph caught up with them. But when they saw him coming, their hatred, which had festered for so long, erupted into

murderous intent. 'Look! Here comes Daddy's blue-eyed little dream boy. We'll never get a better chance to get our own back. Let's kill him, and dump his body in a water pit. We can say a wild animal got him. And that'll be the end of him and his wretched little dreams.'

Only Reuben resisted. 'Not murder,' he pleaded. 'By all means throw him into a pit to teach him a lesson, but no bloodshed.' His plan was to come back later and rescue Joseph.

When Joseph reached them, they grabbed him, tore the hated robe from his back, and threw him in the empty water pit. Just as they began their meal, they saw a trade caravan, its camels loaded with goods, following the Spice Route down to Egypt. Judah had an idea. 'Why risk killing the little brat? What would we gain? All we want is to be rid of him. Let's sell him to these traders. We'll never see him again! And after all, he is family ...'

The brothers all agreed, so when the traders passed by, they hauled Joseph up out of the pit, and exchanged him for silver. Reuben had not been present during all this, and when he returned to find Joseph gone, he was beside himself. 'What were you thinking? What do we do now?' he demanded. 'What on earth do you think we're going to tell father?'

So they went back to their first plan. They butchered a goat, and smeared its blood all over Joseph's robe. When they got home, they showed their father. 'Look,' they said, innocently. 'We can't be sure, but wasn't this Joseph's? We found it beside the trail.'

Israel knew the robe immediately. 'My son! My darling son has been torn to pieces by a wild animal!' He tore off his robes and put on the rough mourning clothes customary among his people. Day after day he sat wrapped in a fog of grief, refusing all attempts to comfort him. 'I will mourn Joseph for the rest of my life,' he wailed.

Meanwhile, down in Egypt, Joseph was bought as a slave by a man named Potiphar, captain of Pharaoh's bodyguard.

## 38

Back home, Judah decided to move out and set up on his own. He married a local girl, with whom he had three sons – Er, Onan and Shelah.

Judah arranged a marriage for Er with a girl named Tamar. But Er was a bad lot, and God saw to it that his life ended before its time, leaving Tamar a young widow. Local custom dictated that, in this situation, the next eldest brother should take the dead man's place. So Judah said to Onan, 'You know your duty – sleep with Tamar, so that your dead brother's name may live on in his children.'

But Onan had no intention of fathering any children who wouldn't be his own, so, although he slept with Tamar, he made sure he didn't get her pregnant. This greatly displeased God, and Onan died, too.

Judah faced a moral dilemma. He knew his duty was to give Tamar his final son as her husband. But he was worried that Shelah, too, might die, leaving him childless. So he prevaricated. 'Let's not rush into anything,' he told Tamar. 'Why don't you move back home for a while; wait until Shelah's a little older.' So Tamar moved back into her parents' home.

Years passed, and Judah's wife died. After a period of mourning, he decided to go and watch the sheep shearing at a place called Timnah.

Tamar heard about this, and decided the time had come to act – after all, it was clear that Judah had no intention of giving her his youngest son, even though he was well and truly grown up by now. So, taking off her widow's clothes, she disguised herself with a prostitute's veil, and took up a position on the road she knew Judah must use to get to Timnah.

When Judah saw her, he was taken in by her disguise, and, with no idea who she was, propositioned her then and there. 'What will you pay me?' she asked. 'I'll send you a young goat from my flock,' Judah answered. But she pressed him, 'How do I know you'll keep your word?' 'What will you accept as a pledge of my good faith?' asked Judah. 'Give me your merchant's seal, and your staff,' she said. 'They'll do very nicely.' Judah agreed and handed them over. After this encounter, which left Tamar pregnant, she returned home and resumed her role of grieving widow.

When Judah sent a friend with the promised goat, in order to claim back his things, the woman was nowhere to be found. What's more, when his friend asked the locals about her, he was told, 'We know of no prostitute in these parts.' When he told Judah all this, Judah said, 'Let's forget it. I don't want this getting out. Let her keep her spoils. After all, I've tried to play fair. It's not as if I didn't try to give her the goat I promised, is it?'

Three months passed, and then Judah received the shocking news. 'Tamar's been exposed as a whore. She's pregnant!' Furious, Judah ordered her to be burnt alive. But as she was dragged out of the house, she flung his seal and staff at his feet, and said, 'I'm pregnant by the owner of these. Any idea whose they might be?'

Judah was stricken with remorse. 'She's behaved more honourably than I have,' he said, 'because I wouldn't give her my son.' Even though she was pregnant by him, he did not take advantage of that to claim her as his own.

Tamar was in fact pregnant with twin boys. During the final stages of her labour, one of the boys' hands emerged. Grabbing it, the midwife tied a scarlet thread to it, 'so we'll know which one came out first!' she said. But in fact, the other one beat him to it, and that is how they came by their names. The first

was named Perez (which means 'breaking out') and the other Zerah (meaning 'scarlet').

## 39

His brothers may have been doing their best to put Joseph out of their minds, but God had not forgotten him. God ensured that Joseph's master, Potiphar, spotted his potential, and noted his hard work. Before long, Joseph began to rise through the household ranks, firstly becoming Potiphar's personal slave, and then taking charge of the whole household. Joseph's ability and dedication, combined with God's favour meant that Potiphar's life flourished as never before. With all his affairs in Joseph's capable hands, he didn't have to worry about a thing.

However, someone else had their eye on this good-looking young foreigner. In fact, Potiphar's wife couldn't take her eyes off him, and set her heart on getting him into bed with her.

But Joseph turned her advances down point blank. 'Your husband has shown me great trust and favour. He's put me in charge of everything. I can help myself to anything I want, except you, because you are his wife. How could I betray him and my God like that?' But day after day, she continued to tempt him, and so determined was Joseph to resist her advances that he soon began to avoid her whenever possible.

That couldn't go on forever, of course, and one day he found himself alone with her in the house. 'Come to bed with me!' she begged, grabbing hold of his cloak. But Joseph broke free and ran, leaving his cloak in her hands.

Humiliated, Potiphar's wife called her servants. 'Now we see the truth!' she shouted. 'This foreign slave thinks he can treat us as his playthings. He's just tried to seduce me, but I screamed and he ran. Look! Here's his cloak.'

When Potiphar came home that evening, she repeated her accusation to him. 'That Hebrew slave you regard so highly tried to rape me today! Luckily, when I screamed, he ran off. I kept his cloak to show you.'

Potiphar was furious, and threw Joseph into prison.

But even there, God looked after Joseph. This time, it was the prison warden who noticed Joseph; soon, Joseph found himself in charge of the inmates and all the organisation of the prison. Like Potiphar before him, the warden found that, with Joseph in charge, he didn't have to worry about a thing.

## 40

Some time later, two new prisoners arrived. One had been Pharaoh's personal baker; the other his private wine steward. Both had offended the king, and both were assigned to Joseph's care.

One night, the two men had troubling dreams, and neither could disguise their anxiety the next day. Joseph could see something was wrong. 'What's the matter?' he asked them. 'You two look as though you've seen a ghost.'

'We each had a dream last night,' they replied. 'Such vivid dreams, they must mean something, but there's no one in here who can interpret them for us.'

'Don't worry!' said Joseph. 'That's one of God's specialities. Tell your dreams to me.'

'In my dream,' said Pharaoh's former wine steward, 'I saw a vine with three branches. As I watched, clusters of grapes ripened before my eyes. I found I was holding Pharaoh's cup, so I pulled off some grapes, squeezed the juice into it, and placed it in Pharaoh's hand.'

'OK,' said Joseph. 'The three branches mean three days. In three days, you'll be out of here, a free man, restored to your former position. You'll soon be pouring drinks for the king again! But listen! When all this comes true, put in a good word to Pharaoh for me. Life has been cruel to me. I'm far from home, sold into slavery, and have done nothing to deserve being locked up in here. Please – don't forget me.'

The baker was impressed, and encouraged too; Joseph's interpretation was not only convincing, it also had a good ending. 'In my dream,' he said, 'I was balancing three baskets on my head; the top one was full of delicacies for Pharaoh, but the birds were eating them.'

'The three baskets also mean three days,' Joseph told him. 'But I'm afraid your outlook isn't so good. In three days, Pharaoh will have you beheaded, and your body impaled for the birds to peck away your flesh.'

Three days later, it was Pharaoh's birthday, and he threw a party for his top people. Guess what happened! He had his two former servants brought in and paraded before his guests. He restored his wine steward to his position; but he had the baker executed, just as Joseph had foretold.

The steward, however, forgot all about Joseph ...

## 41

Two long years passed. And then, one night, Pharaoh had two dreams. In the first, he was standing by the Nile, and saw seven healthy, plump cows walk out of the waters, and begin to graze. But then seven starved, skeletal cows emerged, and they ate the first cows. The second dream was similar: seven healthy, strong ears of corn were gobbled up by seven straggly, diseased ears

of corn. Each time he woke in a sweat, before falling back into a troubled sleep.

As soon as he woke up the next morning, Pharaoh summoned his sorcerers and wise men, and told them his dreams. But none of them could offer an interpretation.

Just then the wine steward remembered Joseph. 'How could I have forgotten?' he said. 'You recall, your majesty, when you had cause to be angry with your baker and me, and sent us to prison? One night, we both had dreams, and one of the other prisoners, one of Potiphar's slaves as I remember, gave us meanings which were spot on. You restored me to my position, and beheaded the baker, just as he predicted.'

So Pharaoh summoned Joseph. He barely had time for a quick shave and change of clothes before he found himself standing before the most powerful man on earth. 'I had a dream,' Pharaoh said, 'and no one can tell me what it means. But I'm told you have a gift with dreams.'

'No,' replied Joseph. 'I have no such gift. But God will reveal the meaning to Pharaoh.'

So Pharaoh told Joseph the dreams. 'I was standing by the Nile, and out of the waters came seven strong, plump cows. As they grazed, seven others appeared, scrawny and starved – believe me, I've never seen anything like them in Egypt; they made my flesh crawl. These cows ate up the first seven, but you'd never have known; they were just as gaunt as they had been before. I woke with a start before getting back to sleep.

'Then, I watched seven glorious ears of corn gobbled up by seven mean and withered ears. I told all this to my sorcerers, but they were completely baffled by it.'

'Both dreams carry the same message,' Joseph said. 'God is showing you the future. The seven healthy cows and the seven good ears of corn represent seven years of abundant harvests throughout your lands. But these good years will be followed by seven years of famine unlike anything Egypt has ever experienced. Those years will be so bad it will seem the seven good years never happened. God gave you two different dreams to emphasise how serious a warning it is. Have no doubt – this is all going to happen, and soon.

'If I may be so bold as to advise Pharaoh? As God has so generously warned your majesty of what is to happen, why not appoint someone with the wisdom to prepare the nation for this calamity? Give him charge of the whole land, and, under him, appoint officials with your authority to take one fifth of each harvest into the royal granaries during the seven years of abundant crops. Then, when the years of famine come, you can save your country from ruin.'



It didn't take Pharaoh and his court long to see the wisdom of this plan, nor to identify their preferred candidate for the job. 'What are our chances of finding anyone better than this Joseph?' Pharaoh asked them. 'Why, we've seen with our own eyes that God himself speaks through him!'

So Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'Since God himself speaks through you, you are by definition the wisest among us. I appoint you my second-in-command. From today, I give you charge of my palace and the whole country. From now on, all my people will obey your every word. Only I will rank above you.'

Pharaoh gave Joseph his own royal ring, so that he could issue official orders, dressed him in fabulous robes and placed a solid gold chain around his neck. Joseph was given his own chariot, and wherever he went, guards cleared the way for him. Pharaoh conferred Egyptian nationality on Joseph, and arranged his marriage to the daughter of a priest of one of Egypt's many gods.

Joseph was just 30 years old when he became the second most powerful man in the world's most powerful nation.

For the next seven years, when the land produced one abundant harvest after another, he travelled the length and breadth of the land, storing enormous quantities of grain in strategic locations in all the nation's cities. The amounts were so vast they defeated the efforts of the record keepers.

In those good years, Joseph's new wife bore him two sons. He named the first Manasseh (from the word 'forget' in his native tongue) because, he said, 'God has made me forget all the pain and suffering of my early years'. The second he called Ephraim ('doubly fruitful'). 'God has given me more than I could ever have imagined in the very place where I knew such appalling suffering.'

Then, just as Joseph had foretold, the harvests began to fail, and famine struck everywhere, reaching lands far beyond Egypt's borders. Egypt alone had plentiful reserves of food. When the people petitioned Pharaoh for food, he told them, 'Joseph is in charge. Do what he says.'

Once famine had gripped the entire nation, Joseph opened his store houses and sold grain to the people. Word spread that Egypt had food, and soon, people from the surrounding nations were flooding in.

## 42

Canaan suffered too, and Israel said to his sons, 'It's no good you just sitting around here with long faces, hoping something will turn up. They say Egypt has grain to sell. Go and trade for food, or we face certain death.'

He sent ten of his sons, but kept his new favourite, Benjamin, at home, for fear of what might happen to him. So Joseph's brothers joined all the others streaming into Egypt looking for help. Soon, it was their turn to stand before Joseph. Along with all the others, they bowed down before him.

Joseph had changed beyond all recognition; and, in any case, how would they even imagine it might be him? He, however, recognised his brothers as soon as he saw them. Realising they didn't have a clue who he was, he spoke to them roughly. 'Where are you from?' 'Canaan,' they replied. 'We've come to buy food.' Joseph glared at them. 'More likely you're here to spy on us,' he accused. 'Come to seek out our weaknesses, gathering intelligence ahead of an invasion.'

'No!' they protested. 'We're telling the truth. All we want is food. We're all from the same family, honest men, not spies!'

'I don't believe you,' said Joseph. 'It's the truth,' they pleaded, horrified at this turn of events. 'There were twelve of us; one is at home with our father. The other one ... died.'

'Prove it,' said Joseph. 'One of you go and get this younger brother and bring him here. The rest of you will remain as my prisoners until I see him.' And he had them all locked up.

After leaving them to stew for three days, Joseph revised his demands. 'I want to please God by doing what is right, so here's what you're going to do. One of you is to stay here, while the others go home, with food for your family. But you must bring your younger brother back, to prove you're telling the truth.'

The brothers realised they had little option but to do exactly what this Egyptian lord said, and their guilt over the events of long ago flooded back. 'Now we're paying the price for what we did to Joseph,' they said. 'Remember the terror on his face when he begged us not to kill him? But we turned our backs on him. That's why all this is happening to us.'

Reuben rounded on them. 'Didn't I tell you not to harm him? But would you listen? Oh no, you all thought you knew better. And now his blood is crying out for justice.'

They had no idea, of course, that Joseph could follow every word they said, because he was using an interpreter to speak with them, as he did with all foreigners. For a moment, as he listened, he lost his composure and had to turn his face away. Steeling himself, he had his guards tie Simeon up before their eyes. He ordered his men to fill their sacks with grain, and to provide food for their journey home. (He also made sure that the silver with which they had paid for the grain was hidden in their bags.) Loading their belongings on to their donkeys, the brothers set out.

When they stopped that night, one went to feed the donkeys. Opening his sack of grain, he was shocked to see something glinting in the moonlight. 'My silver!' he exclaimed. 'How come it's in my sack?' 'What's God doing to us?' the brothers asked one another, sick to their stomachs at what it might mean.

Once safely home, they told Israel the whole story. 'The man in charge spoke roughly to us, and accused us of being spies. We swore we were just ordinary, honest men. We told him our family history, about our one brother who died, and our other one still here with you. Then he decided to test us, to see whether we were telling the truth or not. "I'll hold one of you hostage, while the others go home, with food for your family. Bring your younger brother to me, to prove your story, and I'll let your brother go, and give you permission to trade for more food.'"

Later, when they emptied their sacks, and each found the silver used to buy the grain, they were filled with terror. Israel exploded with rage. 'You've stolen my children. First Joseph – don't forget he died trying to find you. Now Simeon is lost, and you want to take Benjamin away from me too. My whole life is ruined!'

Reuben turned to him. 'Place Benjamin in my care,' he said. 'Trust me to look after him and bring him home again safely. If I don't, kill both my sons!'

'Are you mad?' Israel shouted. 'You think I'm going to let my son out of my sight? Look what happened to Joseph. Benjamin is all I have left. If anything were to happen to him, it would be the death of me.'

## 43

But the famine tightened its grip, and soon they had eaten all the grain from their first visit to Egypt. 'Go back and buy us some more,' said Israel. 'But the man was in deadly earnest,' Judah reminded him. 'He said he'd refuse even to see us unless Benjamin was with us. We can't go without him.'

'Why did you have to tell this man you had another brother?' Israel demanded. 'What choice did we have?' they replied. 'He was insistent, probing for holes in our story, determined to believe we were spies. He kept on and on with his questions, giving us the third degree – was our father still alive? Did we have any other brothers? We just answered him as best we could. How were we to know he'd demand Benjamin as proof?'

Judah turned to his father and said, 'We're wasting time. We've got no choice but to go back, and there's not a moment to lose if we're to prevent the whole family starving to death. Send Benjamin with me. I'll guarantee your precious boy's safe return. Hold me personally responsible. If I don't return him to you safe and sound, you can punish me for the rest of my life. In the time we've taken to argue this through, we could have gone to Egypt and back twice!'

Then Israel relented. 'What must be must be. Take some luxuries with you as a gift for this lord. A little honey, some spices, pistachio nuts and almonds. And double the amount of silver. Let's hope that was just some administrative error. And ... yes, if you must, take Benjamin. Set off at once. And may the Lord God move the man's heart to let Simeon and Benjamin both come home. Not that I can see anything but yet more grief ahead of me.'

The brothers made the journey to Egypt in record time. When Joseph saw Benjamin, he said to his steward, 'Take them to my personal quarters, and prepare food; they'll share my midday meal with me.'

When the brothers learnt they were being taken to the great lord's house, they began to fear for their lives. 'It must be the silver,' they said. 'He's going to seize us as slaves, and strip us of everything we own.' So they tried to explain their predicament to the steward. 'Please, listen to us. You remember that we came here before, to buy food, like everyone else. But somehow, the silver we'd used to buy grain found its way back into our sacks. We've no idea how it happened, but you can be sure we've brought it back, plus more to buy food again this time. You have to believe us – we've no idea how the silver ended up back in our sacks!'

'Don't worry,' he replied. 'Your God must be pleased with you. Who else could make silver appear in your sacks? We have the silver you paid for your first load of grain.' Then he reunited them with Simeon, showed them where they could wash, and arranged for their donkeys to be fed. The brothers began to get ready to speak with the lord, laying out their gifts and rehearsing what they would say.

When Joseph appeared, they once again bowed low before him. 'How are you?' he asked them. 'And what of that elderly father you told me about? Is he still alive?'

'Yes,' they replied. 'Alive, well, and indebted to you.' And they all bowed again.

'And who's this?' Joseph asked, looking at Benjamin. 'Is this the younger brother you told me about? God bless you, young man.' Joseph could contain his emotions no longer, and rushing to his bedroom, wept openly. It took him some time to compose himself but when he had, he washed his face, went back to his brothers and ordered lunch to be served.

Joseph ate at a separate table, according to his people's customs (Egyptians didn't eat with foreigners). The brothers were flabbergasted to find themselves seated in order of their age. How on the earth could the Egyptians have known? After each course was served to Joseph, portions were brought down to them. They could hardly fail to notice that Benjamin received five times as much as the rest of them. For the first time since their arrival back in Egypt, they began to relax and enjoy themselves a little.

## 44

Joseph gave his chief steward precise instructions. 'Fill their sacks with as much grain as they can carry, and put their silver back in too, just as you did the last time. But this time, I want you to hide my silver cup in the youngest one's sack.'

Early the next morning, the brothers set off with their donkeys. But they had hardly gone any distance when Joseph sent his steward to overtake them. He had told the man exactly what to say.

'How could you? After all the kindness my master has shown you! Why would you steal from him? You've taken his silver cup, and not just any old silver cup. It's the one he uses in his religious devotions.'

The brothers were shocked. 'What are you talking about? We'd never dream of doing anything like that! You know full well that we brought back the silver we found in our sacks last time, and more! Surely that tells you we don't need to steal from your master. We know we're innocent, so search us all. If you find this cup, execute the one who took it. And make the rest of us your master's slaves.'

'Good idea,' said the steward, 'but only the thief – the rest of you will be free to go.'

The brothers all lowered their sacks, and the steward began his search. And, of course, there was the cup, in Benjamin's sack, right where the steward himself had hidden it. The brothers could hardly believe their eyes. How could this be happening? They tore their clothes, loaded everything back on the donkeys, and trudged reluctantly back into the city.

They were taken straight to Joseph's house, where they flung themselves at his feet. 'How could you do such a foolish thing?' he demanded. 'Don't you know I can divine secrets?'

'I don't know what to say,' replied Judah. 'We're completely innocent, but there's no way of proving it. The evidence is all stacked against us. God has given you every reason to find us guilty. We gave your steward our word and we stand by that; take us for slaves.'

'What do you take me for?' demanded Joseph. 'I'm not going to punish you all for a crime committed by one individual. Only the one found with my cup will become my slave. The rest of you are free to go.'

'Please, my lord,' pleaded Judah. 'Let me speak. I know you have the power of life and death, but I beg you, hold your anger in check. You remember asking about our family when we were here before? We told you about our elderly father, and the two sons born in his old age. One died years ago, and the other is the only surviving son of his mother. Our father dotes on him.'

'When you demanded we bring him here, we told you it would be the death of our father. But you insisted that was the only way we would even see you again. So home we went and told our father what you'd said. He tried everything he could think of to avoid letting Benjamin go. "You know that his mother bore me two sons. One is already lost to me, torn to pieces by some

wild beast. And now you want to tear Benjamin from me. If anything should happen to him, it will be the end of me.”

‘Don’t you see? We can’t go home without Benjamin! It will kill our father. He can’t live without the boy! We might as well drive a knife into his heart! I gave him my word that I would bring his boy home safely. Please, I beg you, take me in his place. Let Benjamin go home with his brothers, and do whatever you will with me. How could I face my father, and watch grief eat him away?’

## 45

Joseph could contain himself no longer, and turned to his servants. ‘Out! All of you, out! Leave me now!’ Once alone with his brothers, Joseph told them who he was. Unable to contain the pain of so many years any longer, he broke down and wept openly. His servants heard his cries; and they, of course, told Pharaoh’s servants.

‘It’s me!’ Joseph said to his astonished brothers. ‘Is father truly still alive?’ They were utterly dumbfounded, and so terrified that they couldn’t answer. ‘Come closer,’ he said. ‘Don’t you remember your own brother? The one you got rid of all those years ago? But you mustn’t blame yourselves for what you did. I now see God’s hand in it all. He sent me here to save lives, including yours! Listen: this famine’s only two years old. Another five harvests will fail after this one. When you sold me on that fateful day, you ensured our family’s survival!

‘Although I couldn’t see it at the time, God’s hand was behind yours. He’s made me lord of this whole land, second only to Pharaoh himself, for a reason. Now, I want you to go straight back home. Tell father his son lives, and has become a great lord in Egypt. Bring the whole family down. Bring everything with you, all the livestock too. I’ll set you up with everything you need to survive the remaining years of famine.

‘Surely you can see that it’s really me? I know that Benjamin recognises me. Tell father all that has happened, and bring him to me as soon as you possibly can.’

Then Joseph hugged Benjamin and wept, as his younger brother clung to him, his body racked with sobs. Brother after brother fell into his arms until, tears finally exhausted, they sat and talked for hours, catching up on all that had happened over the intervening years.

Pharaoh was delighted to learn that Joseph had been reunited with his brothers, and told him, ‘Send them home to gather your father and the rest of your family. Bring them to me. I’ll give them the pick of the land. They’ll never want for anything again. Give them carts for transport. Tell them to leave their possessions; they’ll have no need of them!’

So Joseph kitted his brothers out for their return journey: as well as carts and provisions, he gave them new clothes. Benjamin received a magnificent gift of silver and five sets of clothes. Ten donkeys were loaded with some of Egypt's finest produce, while others groaned under sacks of grain and provisions for the trip back down to Egypt. Joseph saw his brothers off with a smile and the warning, 'No quarrelling en route!'

So they returned to Canaan. As soon as they saw their father, they all started speaking at once. 'Father! Father! It's Joseph ... your son Joseph is alive! In fact, he's the very man we saw! He's in charge of everything down in Egypt.' Israel was speechless, unable to believe his ears. But as they told him more and more of what had happened, and when they showed him all they'd brought back from Pharaoh, his spirits lifted; finally, he said, 'Alright, alright, I believe you! Joseph ... my son ... he's alive! All these long years I have dreamt of seeing him again before I die. And now I will!'

## 46

So Israel gathered his entire family – sons, daughters and grandchildren, animals, and all they owned, and set out for Egypt. At one of the stops along the way (at a place called Beersheba), he made time to worship God. That night, God spoke to him in his dreams. 'Don't worry about settling in Egypt, for I will go with you. I will multiply your small family into a people without number, just as I promised your ancestors. And, when your time comes, Joseph will be with you as you die, and your body will be brought back to Canaan.'

All together, Israel took 67 immediate family members to Egypt – 70 if you count Joseph and his two sons who were already there.

When Joseph heard that Israel and the family were near, he came out in his chariot to meet them. What a sight that reunion was, father and son wrapped in each other's arms and weeping for joy. 'Oh my son, my son,' whispered Israel. 'I've dreamt of this moment every day since I lost you, knowing it could never happen. And yet here you are, as large as life! After all those years of grief and misery, I can, at long last, die content.'

Joseph said, 'I'll go and tell Pharaoh you're here; I'll tell him you're shepherds, and have brought all your flocks and herds with you. When he asks you what you do, simply tell him that you follow the ways of your ancestors, living as shepherds. Egyptians tend to look down their noses at shepherds, but they'll be more than happy to let you settle in Goshen.'

## 47

So Joseph went to see Pharaoh, taking five of his brothers with him. 'What do you do for a living?' he asked them. 'We're shepherds, just as our father was,

and his father before him,' they replied. 'We've come here to escape the famine in Canaan. Please let us settle in Goshen.'

Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'Egypt welcomes your family with open arms. Give them the best land we have. By all means, settle them in Goshen. And if any of them show real promise, put them in charge of my own flocks and herds.'

Then Joseph presented his father to Pharaoh. 'Bless you, O king, for your kindness to an old man,' said Israel. 'And just how old are you?' Pharaoh asked. '130,' replied Israel. 'My life has been a hard journey, and I won't reach the grand old age of some of my ancestors.' Israel blessed Pharaoh again, and left.

So the family settled in some of Egypt's best land, the gift of Pharaoh himself. And Joseph provided enough food for them all.

By this time, the whole world seemed to be wasting away from hunger. Joseph had brought in a vast fortune for Pharaoh, but now, no one had any money left to buy grain. The people appealed to Joseph. 'Have mercy! Give us food or watch us die!'

'As you have used up all your money, I'll give you food in exchange for your livestock,' he decreed. So they brought him their cattle, their sheep and goats, even their horses and donkeys, and handed them over for food.

The following year, the people said, 'Our money and our livestock are spent. All we have left is our land and our labour. Rather than us all dying, and the land going to rack and ruin, buy us, lock, stock and barrel. Better to be Pharaoh's slaves than corpses.'

So Joseph enslaved the entire population of Egypt, giving Pharaoh ownership of almost every piece of land, and almost every living thing throughout the land. Only the priests kept their freedom and their land, as Pharaoh himself had guaranteed them regular food supplies.

Joseph told the people. 'From now on, when good harvests return, a fifth belongs to Pharaoh. Use the rest for food, and for future sowing.'

'You've saved us!' they shouted. 'You won't regret your mercy; we'll gladly serve Pharaoh.'

So it was Joseph who established the custom of Pharaoh taking a fifth of everything Egypt produces.

Israel enjoyed seventeen years in Egypt, where he and his family prospered in their new home, acquiring property, and growing in number. Then, realising his life was drawing to an end, he sent for Joseph. 'If you love me, swear that you will respect my last wishes,' he said. 'Don't bury me here, far from home. Take my body back to Canaan, and bury me alongside my ancestors.'



'Yes, father,' said Joseph. 'Swear it,' said his father. So Joseph swore an oath, and Israel bowed his head in gratitude to God.

## 48

Some time later, Joseph was told, 'Your father is ill.' So Joseph hurried to him, taking his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. At the news that his son and grandsons were on their way, Israel rallied a little.

'Long ago, in the land of Canaan,' he told Joseph, 'our great God promised me a multitude of descendants, and told me that the land would belong to our people for ever. I want your sons to be regarded as mine, just like Reuben or Simeon or any of the others, so that they share in this inheritance. And never forget your mother, Rachel, the love of my life. Sadly, she died while we were travelling, and I buried her near Bethlehem.

'Bring your sons closer, so that I can bless them', Israel said. He was almost blind, so Joseph had to guide his sons into his father's embrace; and he kissed them. 'Time was when I despaired of ever seeing your face again,' he said to Joseph. 'Little did I ever think then that I'd see your strapping lads as well!'

According to tradition, the older son received a richer blessing, symbolised by the touch of the right hand of the one giving the blessing. So Joseph guided Manasseh, his eldest boy, to his father's right hand, and his younger son, Ephraim, to Israel's left. But Israel crossed his arms, and reversed the traditional order as he blessed them.

'May our great God, who led my father, and his father before him, the One I have known as my shepherd all these long years, the One who has kept me safe throughout my life, look with favour on these boys. May they take my family name, and have many, many descendants.'

When Joseph saw what his father was doing, he tried to take his right hand and place it on Manasseh's head. 'Father, you've got it wrong,' he said. 'This is the eldest.'

'I know what I'm doing, son,' said Israel. 'Manasseh's descendants will flourish, too, have no fear. But his younger brother will father several nations. The day will come when our people will say, "May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh."

'I'm not long for this life. But God will watch over you, and take you back to the land of our ancestors. I give you that stretch of land that I took by force from the Amorites.'

## 49

Then Israel called all his sons together and spoke words of destiny and blessing over each one.

'Reuben, my firstborn, how brightly you burned! How my heart swelled with pride as you grew strong and won honour. Yet you were always wild and reckless, unable to control your passions – your star is already on the wane.

'Simeon and Levi add a twist to the phrase "blood brothers." Violence comes to them as easily as breathing. People will think long and hard before joining them, for they hold life lightly. Their descendants will be scattered across the land.

'Judah, you will be highly regarded by your brothers, and feared by your enemies. They'll no more dare disturb you than they would a sleeping lion!

'Down long years, your descendants will safeguard power and authority until the coming of the One who will command the destiny of nations.

'Zebulun will settle on the coast, offering trading ships one safe harbour after another as far north as Sidon.

'Issachar may not attract many second glances, but he knows the value of hard work, and will spare no effort to make the best of the fine lands that will be his.

'Dan will have a passion for justice, and be resolute in defending the land against invaders – but God himself will be our people's ultimate deliverer.

'Gad will always need to be vigilant, on the look out for enemies; but when he is attacked, he will be too strong for them.

'Asher will live a life of luxury, eating the food of kings.

'Naphtali will be a free spirit, his children the envy of the world.

'I see you, Joseph, as a well-watered vine loaded with grapes. No matter who attacks you, they will find you steadfast and resolute, strengthened by the same God who has walked with me every step of my life. You too will come to know him as your rock and your shepherd. What blessings he has in store for you! A sky full of blessings, an ocean of blessings! Blessings for you and the generations to come.

'And to God's blessings I add a mountain of fatherly blessings. O God, crown Joseph with every blessing. Truly, you've made him a prince among men.

'Benjamin is wild as a wolf, devouring and plundering all who stand in his way.'

These brothers were the founders of the twelve clans which became the nation which bore their father's name – Israel. He pronounced their destiny over each one of them.

'When I die,' he told them, 'bury me in the Cave of Mamre, which my grandfather Abraham bought. My parents and grandparents are already buried there, as is my first wife, Leah.'

After speaking his last words, Israel died peacefully in his sleep, at the age of 147.

## 50

Joseph embraced his father's body and wept. He then had his doctors embalm him, a process which takes forty days. Seventy days of mourning were observed throughout Egypt.

After the period of mourning was over, Joseph went to see Pharaoh. 'My father's last wish was to be buried in our homeland. If you feel kindly disposed towards me, please let me go and perform this last service for him. I will return as soon as I can.'

'Of course,' said Pharaoh. 'You must go and do as your father asked.'

What a procession left Egypt with Israel's body! Almost everyone in Joseph's family went, apart from the children, who stayed with the flocks and herds. The great and the good of Egypt went with them, on horseback and in chariots.

Just before crossing the River Jordan, they observed another week of mourning, with loud laments and cries of grief, under the curious gaze of the local inhabitants.

So Joseph and his brothers fulfilled their father's last wish, burying him with his ancestors in the cave at Mamre. Then they all returned to Egypt.

Israel's death awakened Joseph's brothers' old fears. 'What if he's been hiding his hatred all these years? What if, even now, he's plotting revenge for what we did to him back then?' they thought. So they sent a messenger to him, who said, 'Before he died, father was eager to be assured that you would forgive us everything we did to you all those years ago. So please let bygones be bygones.' Hearing this, and realising that his brothers still did not trust him, Joseph wept.

His brothers came in and threw themselves down at his feet. 'We're your slaves,' they said. But Joseph said, 'Don't be afraid. Do you really think I'm going to step into God's shoes? Punishing you is the furthest thing from my mind. There's no doubt you intended to harm me, but God can even use hatred to good purpose! Just think of all the lives that have been saved! So

don't quake in your boots. I'll make sure you and your children have all you need.'

Joseph lived to see his great-great-grandchildren. Just before he died, he called his brothers to him and said, 'God will not forget his promise. One day, he will lead you back to our homeland. Promise me now that when that day comes, you will take my bones with you.'

Then Joseph died, aged 110. He was embalmed and buried according to Egyptian custom.