

SALT & LIGHT: ADDITIONAL COMMENTARY

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GENESIS 37:1-36

Jacob, Leah, and Rachel had raised their children in Canaan. Rachel died giving birth to her second child, Benjamin. As chapter 37 opens, only Benjamin and Joseph were at home with Jacob and Leah. The ten older sons now had families. Canaan had been their only home for two generations. This land where Isaac and Rebekah had been strangers had become home to their son and his growing family.

Jacob and his wives had been taught deception, manipulation, and favoritism; these behaviors had made them resistant to receiving from one another—and from God. Their patterns of behavior reflected what they'd inherited and been taught in Paddan-Aram, as well as the customs they picked up and adopted in Canaan. Now they were practicing all they'd learned, in their marriage and family, and were passing these patterns on to their children.

Jacob's story takes a remarkable turn in this chapter, and the catalytic event was not initiated by any family member. All the dysfunction of the family persists in chapter 37, including Jacob's favoritism and the manipulative behavior of his second youngest son, Joseph. The older sons had a reputation as murderers, thereby having avenged the rape of their only sister.

The parents knowingly and unwittingly taught these mindsets and skills to their children, and all of them lived these patterns out in Canaan. Their children learned well and honed these skills with one another; in time, they became arch enemies of one another.

Jacob had expressed his favoritism for Rachel upon meeting her father and his family; he continued to favor the children Rachel and he produced, over and above Leah and her children. The rest of the family knew that Jacob loved Joseph. The children responded to *less love* from their father by mistreating one another. Settled into the land, animosity developed a stranglehold upon the family of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel.

Jacob, whose family now was tremendously well-off, expressed his love for Joseph as favoritism and had a long-sleeved robe made for him. Jacob apparently stopped expressing any love for his older children. The impression made by this passage is that it was unusual and uncustomary for Jacob to have a long-sleeved robe made for any of his children—until Joseph turned 17.

Dreams emerged, returned, and reverberated in this family, with multiple households headed for mass destructions. The dreams were given to Joseph, an immature tattletale.

The dreams seemed to him to justify the sense of self-righteousness he nurtured. Perhaps he whispered to himself, "*Just as my father loves me, so these dreams verify: I am better than my brothers who hate me!*"

For unstated reasons, Joseph and his brothers fought over what was right and wrong. Joseph exalted himself above his brothers by reporting on their behaviors to their father; Joseph seemed to sic his father on his brothers! When the dreams repeatedly came to him, he could not and did not want to keep them to himself.

We are told that Joseph kept telling his brothers and then his parents a part of the dream, that they all were bowing down to him. Perhaps that was all that was clear to him as he dreamt. His telling of this particular part of the dream fit within the family's patterns of favoritism, manipulation, and deception. Joseph tattled on his brothers to their father to manipulate his father and avenge his brothers' cruelty toward him. As Joseph told his brothers the part of his dream that kept returning to him, *they became more jealous and infuriated*. Jacob aggravated the conflict between his sons, by having someone sew Joseph a many-colored overcoat, distinguishing him above his brothers.

Joseph was favored but he was not purer than his brothers. In this family (as in most, if not all, families) the ability to make *good* out of evil intentions was just as strong as the readiness to do *evil*! Joseph likely shared the recurring dream with them out of evil intentions toward his brothers, specifically because they expressed hatred toward him and would not even speak to him. The dreams he received may have been partial, but that did not stop Joseph from misusing the dreams and giving a tit for each tat his brothers lobbed at him.

Joseph could not see this, and he did not know it, but he would be the first brother to learn a profound lesson of godliness through the sufferings that awaited all of them. Joseph would suffer at the hands of his brothers; his entire family then would experience the hardships of a seven-year famine. Through these sufferings, they would learn that what Joseph and his brothers meant for evil, God meant for good.

Nations are very similar to family systems. The United States and Canada were formed by Europeans who worked to become wealthy by every necessary means. To achieve this objective, first they had to displace the people who lived in the Americas. Utilizing practices of land and property seizures developed during the Crusades (beginning in 1096

CE), five European nations bordering the Atlantic Ocean collaborated with the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England to rationalize and justify worldwide colonization and white settlement. Beginning in the 14th century, five nations transplanted colonialism to Africa, and then to the Americas and the island nations in the Pacific beginning in the 15th century. Let it be understood that colonialism has not ended.

Second, to attain wealth at the expense of others' loss of life and land, the five nations, including the founders of the United States and Canada, exercised control over women, immigrants, indentured servants, and peoples they enslaved—all of whom were relegated to the lower classes. To exert control, they utilized what we today have named as sexism, racism, slavery, and classism—normal features in every part of the white society throughout the colonies.

The United States has resisted nearly every opportunity throughout its history to disavow sexism, racism, and classism and refuses to make restitution for its role in the extermination of Indigenous Peoples, the impoverishment of women and immigrants, and the enslavement of Africans. The nation continues to use violence to keep these evils in place. Canada continues to resist opportunities of restoration as well.

Until recently, the benefactors of white supremacy in the United States refused to consider replacing the current way

of upholding “law and order.” The US needed a Black man as president, who would help the nation to focus on changing its justice system. Late in his second term, President Barack Obama enlisted the help of those most disproportionately stopped and frisked, arrested for misdemeanors and felonies, incarcerated, and executed by police—*people of color*. Together, they formed a President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing to evaluate the history and practice of policing. Their evaluation resulted in a series of recommendations of methods, systems, and restructuring to curtail violence by police officers. They did not address the massive misdemeanor system—that’s another task for us to engage.

The offspring of people formerly enslaved worked alongside the offspring of people who’d formerly enslaved others to articulate a dream of new ways to do justice and pursue righteousness together.

Two websites to explore:

- Campaign Zero (“We can live in a world where the police don’t kill people by limiting police interventions, improving community interactions, and ensuring accountability”). <https://www.joincampaignzero.org/#vision>
- 8 Can’t Wait (A Project by Campaign Zero). <https://8cantwait.org/>