

Chapter 6

# The Patriarchs



*"Your name shall no more be called Jacob,  
but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men,  
and have prevailed."*

*Genesis 32: 28*

## Chapter 6



### Read

#### Genesis

25:19 - 26:5

27:1 - 45

28:10 - 29:30

32:22 - 33:11

37:1 - 36

45:1 - 20

**A**lthough Abraham had settled permanently in Canaan, he was still a foreigner there. He was living among people who had different customs, spoke with a different accent, and—most of all—worshiped different gods. God had promised the land to his descendants. How horrible it would be if those descendants fell into the revolting idolatry of the Canaanites!

But that was just what might happen if Isaac married one of the local women. That same old problem with the “sons of God” and the “daughters of men” might come up all over again.

## Finding A Wife For Isaac

**And Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his house, who had charge of all that he had, “Put your hand under my thigh, and I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell, but will go to my country and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac.” (Gn 24: 2-4)**

All God’s promises to Abraham were to be fulfilled through Isaac. The only way to keep Isaac from falling into idolatry, Abraham had decided, was to keep him away from the Canaanites. Abraham’s servant therefore went back to Mesopotamia, where Abraham’s relatives still lived. Outside the city of Nahor, he stopped by a well.

The Bible is full of scenes at wells. With no running water, the well was a natural gathering place for the whole community. In particular, it was a gathering place for women, who usually did the work of filling up the water jugs and hauling them back to the house. In ancient Eastern society, the well was one of the few places women gathered outside the home, which is why we first meet many of the most important women in the Bible at a well.

Abraham’s servant saw the women gathering at the well and prayed to God to guide him. “Let the maiden to whom I shall say, ‘Pray, let down your jar that I may drink,’ and who shall say, ‘Drink, and I will water your camels’—let her be the one whom thou hast appointed for thy servant Isaac.”<sup>1</sup>



*“... he bowed himself to the earth before the Lord. And the servant brought forth jewelry of silver and gold, and raiment, and gave them to Rebekah;...” (Gen 24: 52-53)*



Love at first sight: Isaac meets Rebekah

Just then a beautiful young woman appeared at the well and filled her jar.

“Pray, give me a little water to drink from your jar,” Abraham’s servant said.

“Drink, my lord,” the woman said. Then, when the servant had drunk, she said, “I will draw for your camels also, until they have done drinking.”<sup>2</sup>

This was the one!

The young woman was Rebekah, the granddaughter of Nahor, Abraham’s brother. Her brother Laban was the head of the household now. When Abraham’s servant came to his house, he told Laban how Abraham had prospered, and what his mission was. Hearing the story of the meeting at the well, and seeing the lavish gifts Abraham had sent, Laban had no objection to the proposed match. “The thing comes from the LORD,” he said.

But still Rebekah had to agree. She had to make the same decision Abraham had made years before: she had to leave her home and go to a land she had never seen, all on the strength of a promise.

## Jacob And Esau

It was love at first sight when Isaac finally met Rebekah. But for a long time, Rebekah was childless. Finally God answered her prayers. She conceived twins—two sons that seemed to be fighting inside her even before they were born. What was going on? She “went to inquire of the LORD,” and this was the answer she got:

**Two nations are in your womb,  
and two peoples, born of you, shall be divided;  
the one shall be stronger than the other,  
the elder shall serve the younger. (Gn 25: 23)**

They were still struggling when they were born. The first came out red all over, so they named him Esau, which sounded like the word for “red”; the second came out grabbing the first one’s heel, so they called him Jacob, which sounded like the Hebrew for “he takes by the heel” or “he supplants.” As the boys grew up, Esau (the first-born by only minutes) was his father Isaac’s favorite. But Jacob was his mother’s favorite, and mothers in the Bible usually manage to have their way.

The first story we hear about them as young men gives us a good idea of their characters.

**Once when Jacob was boiling pottage, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. And Esau said to Jacob, “Let me eat some of that red pottage, for I am famished!”... Jacob said, “First sell me your birthright.” Esau said, “I am about to die, of what use is a birthright to me?” Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentils, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright. (Gn 25: 29-34)**

Esau thought only of what he wanted now; Jacob thought of the long term. Jacob was also willing to take advantage of the present circumstances to get his way. Esau had sworn to give up a great deal: as the first-born, he would have become the head of the family, and he was entitled to a double share of the inheritance. He gave all that up because all he could think about was his stomach.

Still, it was unlikely that their father Isaac would ratify that deal. He would insist on giving the first-born’s blessing to Esau. Even after Esau had married two local pagan women who “made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah,”<sup>3</sup> he was still his father’s favorite. But Isaac was old and blind by now, and Rebekah came up with a plan to get that blessing for her favorite son.

Isaac had asked Esau to prepare him some of the venison stew he made so well, then come and receive his blessing. Rebekah overheard, and she quickly told her son to bring in some meat before Esau could come back. Rebekah made a stew like Esau’s, then put Esau’s clothes on Jacob. Because Esau was very hairy all over his body, Rebekah also made Jacob wear goatskins on the exposed parts of his body that Isaac could feel.

Isaac might be old and blind, but he could still hear. When Jacob came in and said, “I am Esau your first-born,” the voice sounded wrong.

**Then Isaac said to Jacob, “Come near, that I may feel you, my son, to know whether you are really my son Esau or not.” So Jacob went near to Isaac, who felt him and said, “The voice is Jacob’s voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau.” And he did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau’s hands; so he blessed him. (Gn 27: 21-23)**

A blessing was not a light thing. Once it had been given, it could not be retracted. Thinking he was blessing his favorite son Esau, Isaac gave Jacob the blessing Esau would have had:



Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you.  
Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you.  
Cursed be every one who curses you,  
and blessed be every one who blesses you. (Gn 27: 29)

When Esau came back, he was understandably disappointed. He had probably forgotten all about selling his birthright to Jacob, and even if he remembered it he had probably never taken that oath very seriously. Isaac, too, was horrified.

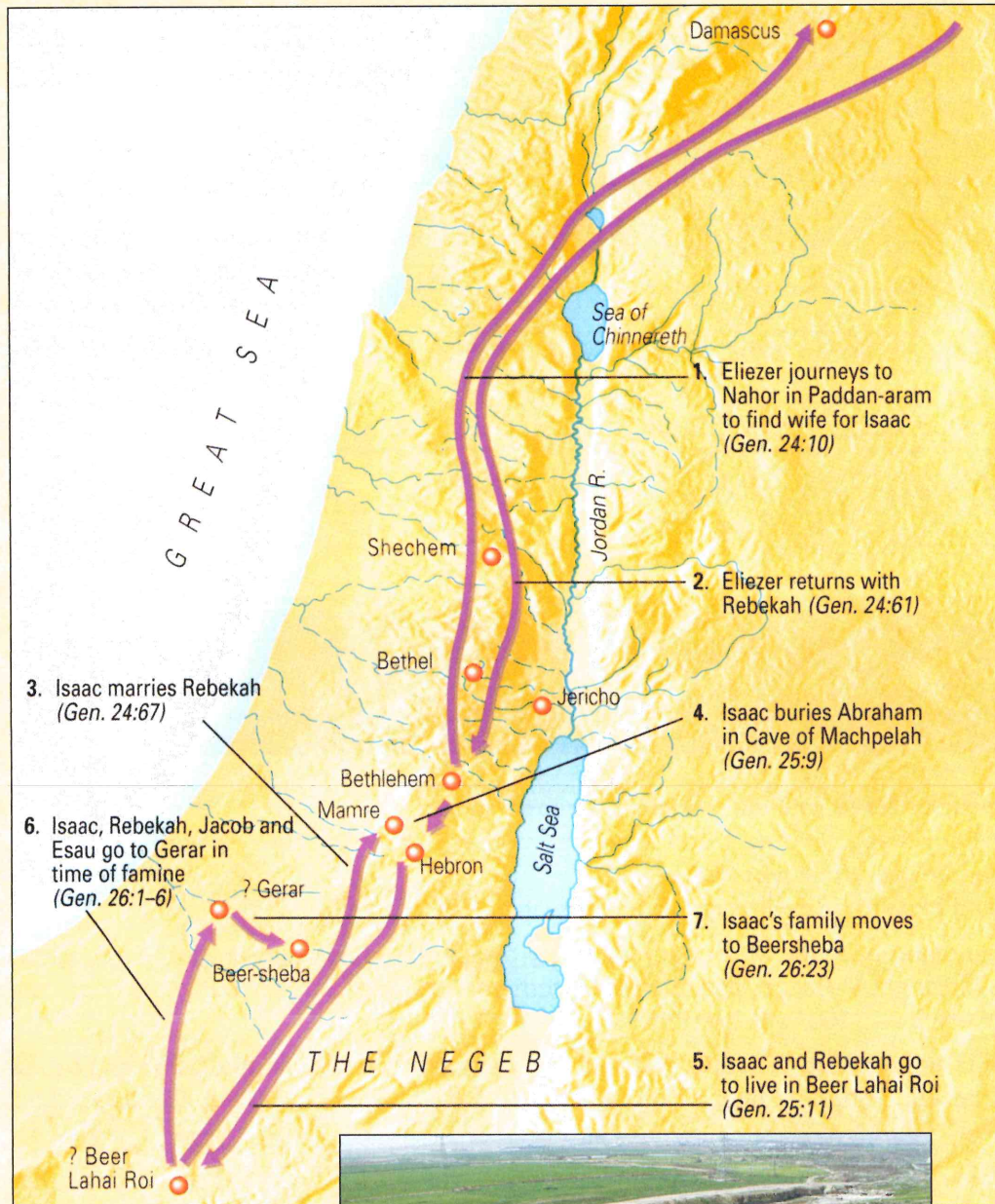
Then Isaac trembled violently, and said, "Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me, and I ate it all before you came, and I have blessed him?—yes, and he shall be blessed." (Gn 27: 33)

It was too late: the blessing had been given. All that was left for Esau was a prophecy that was not very consoling:

Behold, away from the fatness of the earth shall your dwelling be,  
and away from the dew of heaven on high.  
By your sword you shall live,  
and you shall serve your brother;  
but when you break loose  
you shall break his yoke from your neck. (Gn 28: 39-40)

The prophecy referred to the future of the two nations, Israel and Edom. Israel would dominate over Edom for a long time, but when Israel declined, Edom would break free.

## The Journeys Of Isaac And Rebekah



*"From there he went up to Beersheba. And the Lord appeared to him the same night and said, 'I am the God of Abraham your father;...'" (Gn 26:23)*

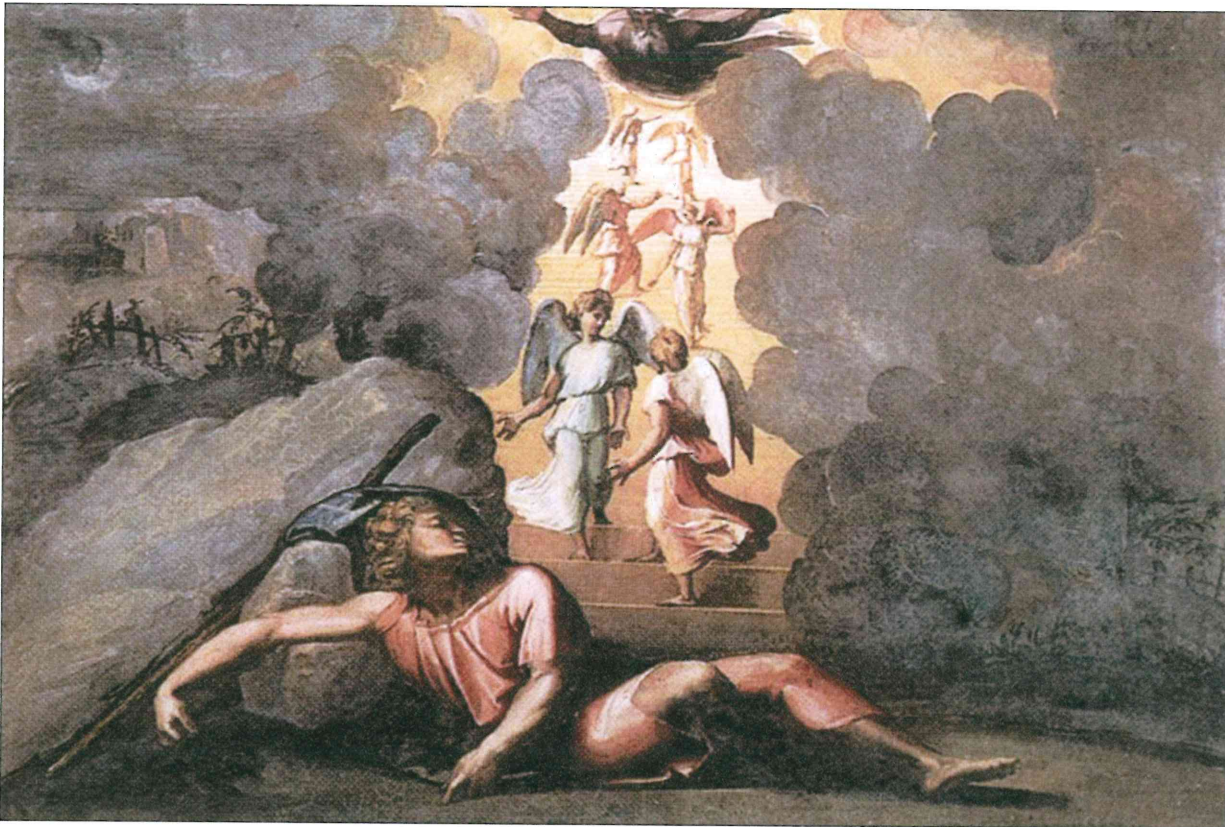


## Jacob's Ladder

**E**sau was furious: he wanted to kill Jacob. Rebekah, however, heard of Esau's plot, so she warned Jacob to run away to his uncle Laban until Esau got over his anger. Isaac blessed him and sent him on his way, telling him to find a wife there. "You shall not marry one of the Canaanite women," he told Jacob.<sup>4</sup> Esau's wives had been making Isaac and Rebekah miserable; they wanted Jacob to avoid the same mistake.

Jacob went off toward Haran, where his uncle lived, taking nothing with him but the staff in his hand.<sup>5</sup> Stopping for the night, he lay down with a stone for a pillow and had a strange dream.

*And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your descendants; and your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and by you and your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed."<sup>6</sup> (Gn 28:12-14)*



It was a renewal of the covenant with Abraham. The same promises were there: land, a dynasty, and (most amazing of all) universal blessing through his descendants. When he woke from his vision, Jacob called the place Beth-el: "House of God."

God had chosen to make Jacob, the younger brother, the one who would carry the promise. It was true that he had tricked his older brother out of his birthright, but God does not choose us because we deserve to be chosen. Jacob would be the one whose descendants would receive Abraham's blessing. But first Jacob would have to get a taste of his own medicine.

## Jacob And Laban

**W**hen Jacob came near Haran, he stopped at a well, and there he saw a beautiful young woman. It was Rachel, his uncle Laban's daughter. He fell in love instantly.

When Jacob met his uncle Laban, there was a joyous family reunion. Jacob stayed for a month, helping Laban tend his flocks. Finally, Laban began to worry that he was taking advantage of Jacob. "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing?" he asked Jacob. "Tell me, what shall your wages be?"

Jacob knew right away what he wanted. He wanted Rachel. It was usual for a man to offer a "marriage present"—a large sum of money or the equivalent in property—to the father of his bride. But Jacob had nothing to offer. So he told Laban, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel."<sup>7</sup>

Laban agreed. But he had an older daughter, Leah, who was not quite so beautiful as Rachel. What would he do with her?

Seven years flew by for Jacob: he was so much in love that "they seemed to him but a few days." The wedding was arranged, and Jacob's veiled bride was brought to his dark tent that night.

When he woke up the next morning, Jacob had quite a shock. The woman next to him was Leah, not Rachel! Laban had tricked him! But there was no going back now.

**And in the morning, behold, it was Leah; and Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?"**

**Laban said, "It is not done in our country, to give the younger before the first-born.**

**Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years." (Gn 29: 25-27)**

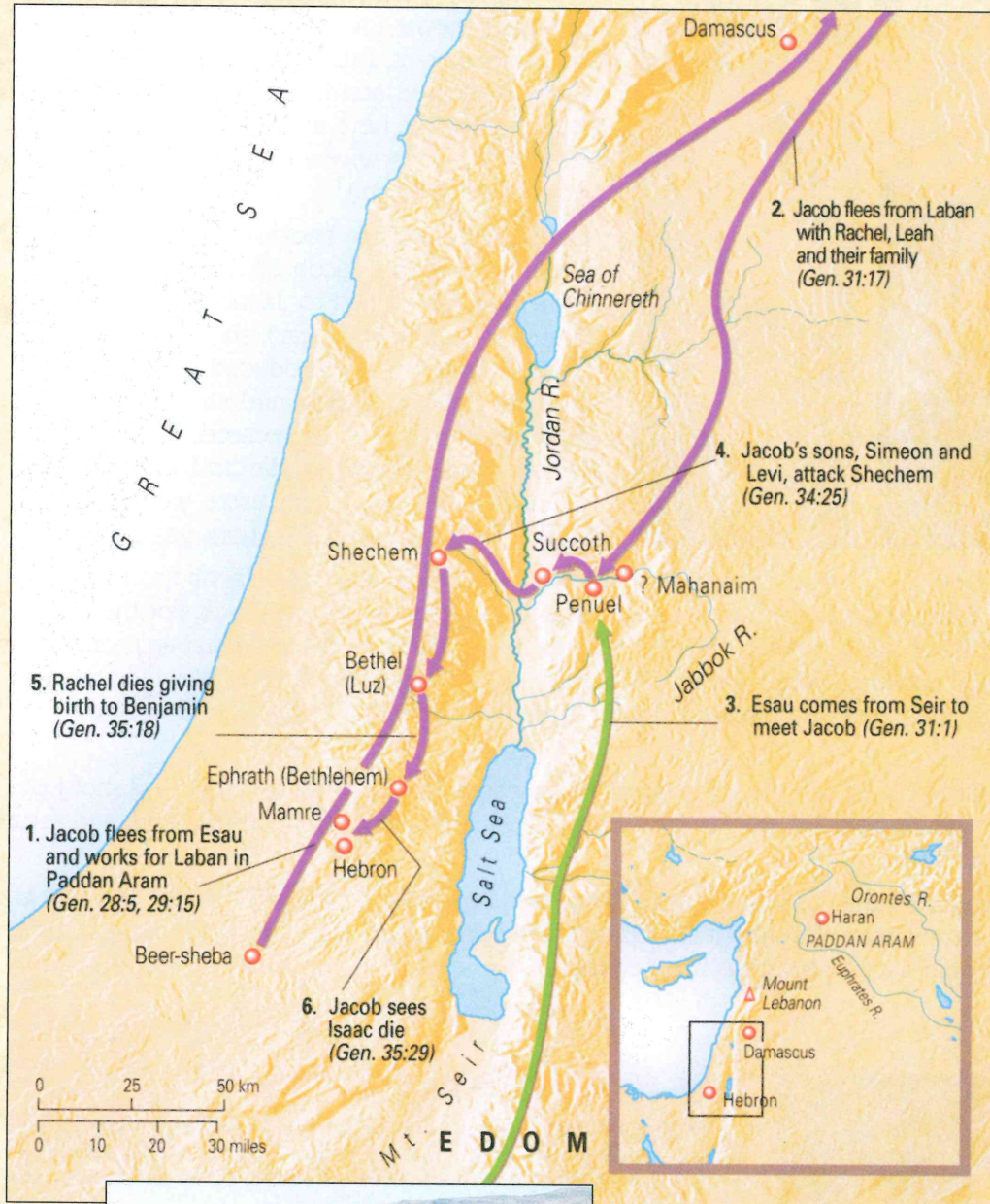
If Jacob wanted Rachel, he would have to work another seven years! He was so much in love that he agreed. At the end of the week of Leah's marriage celebrations, Jacob married Rachel, too, and then settled down to serve Laban for seven more years. Jacob the deceiver had been deceived by his crafty old uncle—and he had become an unwilling polygamist.



Jacob the deceiver had been deceived by his crafty old uncle Laban.



## The Journeys Of Jacob And Rachel



*"And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day... So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel (Penuel)."*

*(Gen 32:24; 30)*

## Twelve Sons



Rachel



Leah

**P**olygamy in the Bible almost always leads to misery. Jacob never loved Leah the way he loved Rachel, and Leah knew it. But Rachel was barren, whereas Leah easily conceived and bore four sons. She named them Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. (All Jacob's sons would be named by his wives; as far as we know, he left that decision up to them.)

Rachel was miserable because she had no sons. Leah was miserable because Jacob obviously loved Rachel more. Rachel gave her maid to Jacob to bear sons for her (as Sarah had done with Hagar); she bore Dan and Naphthali. So Leah, who had not produced any children for a while, gave her maid to Jacob, and she bore Gad and Asher. Then Leah bore two more sons, Issachar and Zebulun; Rachel ceased to be sterile and finally herself bore a son named Joseph. So far there were eleven sons. The twelfth, Benjamin, would be born years later.

Even after the seven years were up, Laban didn't want to let Jacob go. Jacob finally agreed to stay a few more years in exchange for all the spotted sheep and goats in the flock. For the next few years, Laban and Jacob spent most of their time trying to outwit each other, with Laban trying to make sure all the lambs and kids were born solid-colored and Jacob using selective breeding to make sure all the best animals came out spotted. Jacob came out ahead in the game, and he grew rich with his spotted flock.<sup>8</sup>

At last a vision came to Jacob in a dream: he saw an angel who told him that God (not just selective breeding) was responsible for his prosperity. "Now arise, go forth from this land, and return to the land of your birth."

Jacob therefore made his escape from Laban and headed back toward Canaan. It was a good thing to escape from Laban after about twenty years of serving him, but now Jacob had an old problem to face. He would have to meet his brother Esau.



The High Priest wore a breastplate with twelve gems engraved with the names of the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

### The Twelve Tribes Of Israel

Jacob fathered twelve sons: Asher, Benjamin, Dan, Gad, Issachar, Joseph, Judah, Levi, Naphtali, Reuben, Simeon, and Zebulun. They are the ancestors of the tribes of Israel, and the ones for whom the tribes are named. Joseph is the father of two tribes: Manasseh and Ephraim. The tribes were encamped around four sides of the wilderness Tabernacle. (except the tribe of Levi, which was set apart to serve in the Holy Temple).

#### Eastern Tribes

Judah  
Issachar  
Zebulun

#### Southern Tribes

Reuben  
Simeon  
Gad

#### Western Tribes

Ephraim  
Manasseh  
Benjamin

#### Northern Tribes

Dan  
Asher  
Naphtali

## Wrestling With God: Jacob Named Israel

Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to Esau. They came back with news that frightened Jacob: “We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men with him.” Esau—the brother who had planned to kill Jacob—was coming to meet him with a small army. Was that good news or bad? Jacob assumed the worst.

Jacob, now a rich man, also had a lot of followers with him. But he didn’t want to risk losing everything in a battle with his brother’s army. He divided his followers into two groups, thinking that if Esau attacked the first, at least the second would have time to get away. Then he prayed to God. It was something he apparently hadn’t done in a while, but his fear led him back to the God of his fathers.

O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who didst say to me, “Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good,” I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love which thou hast shown to thy servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two companies. Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, lest he come and slay us all, the mothers with the children. But thou didst say, “I will do you good, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.” (Gn 32: 9-12)

After he had prayed, Jacob picked out the best of his flock and sent them with his servants as a present for Esau. Then putting his wives and children as far out of harm’s way as he could, he spent the night alone.

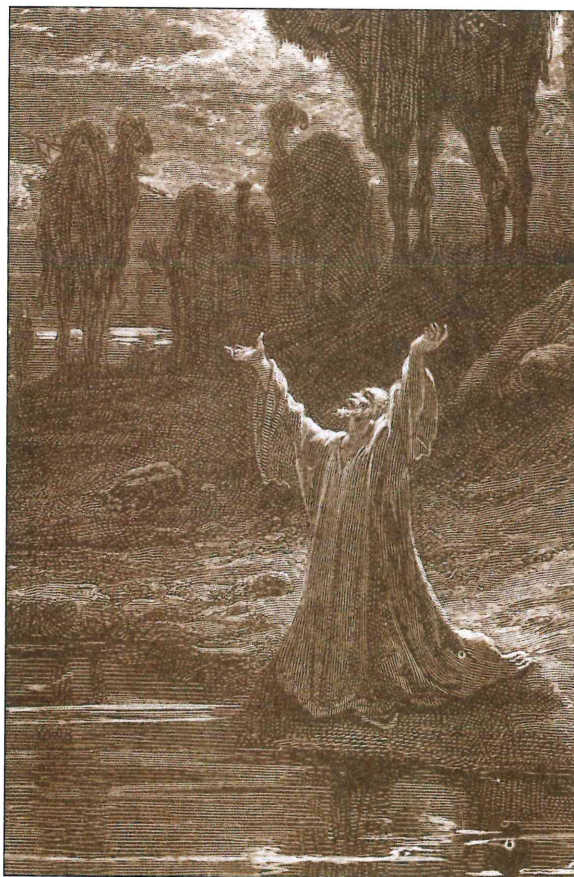
There Jacob had his strangest vision yet. A man wrestled with him all night. Neither Jacob nor the mysterious man could win the struggle. Finally dawn began to appear. “Let me go,” said the mysterious man, “for day is breaking.”

But Jacob had realized that the man was more than just a man.

But Jacob said to him, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” Then he said, “Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” (Gn 32: 26-28)

Jacob had been wrestling with the angel of God himself! Receiving a new name was like being created anew, and the angel explains Israel as meaning “He who strives with God.” It was an appropriate name for Jacob, and it would be even more appropriate for the nation that would come from his descendants.

God renews his promise to Jacob, the ancestor of the twelve tribes of Israel. Before confronting his elder brother Esau, Jacob wrestles all night with a mysterious figure who



refuses to reveal his name, but he blesses him before leaving him at dawn. From this account, the spiritual tradition of the Church has retained the symbol of prayer as a battle of faith and as the triumph of perseverance. (CCC 2573)

The next day, Jacob saw Esau and his whole army coming in the distance. He feared the worst—but he had no need to fear. His prayer had been answered. After twenty years, Esau got over his grudge, and he was delighted to see his younger brother again. They exchanged gifts, enjoyed their reunion for a while, and went their separate ways.

Some time later, God appeared to Jacob again to renew his promise of a new creation.

**And God said to him, Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name... I am God Almighty; be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall spring from you. (Gn 35: 10-11)**

Once again, we see those words “be fruitful and multiply.” We saw them before at the original creation (Gn 1: 28) and at the new creation after the Flood (Gn 9: 1). Here they are again, this time marking the creation of God’s people, Israel.



*Jacob Seeking Forgiveness of Esau*

## Joseph's Brothers Sell Him As A Slave

Of all his sons, Joseph was Jacob's favorite. Naturally, his ten elder brothers resented him for that. (Benjamin, the last of Jacob's sons, was still a little boy.) They resented him even more when Jacob gave Joseph a beautiful and expensive robe.<sup>9</sup> Not everyone agrees on the exact meaning of the Hebrew in the story; some say it was a robe with long sleeves, others that it was a full-length tunic. The traditional translation is "a coat of many colors," and that may be right: Egyptian paintings show rich Semitic visitors wearing many-colored coats. What is clear is that it was a very expensive and luxurious item.

The brothers resented him all the more when Joseph told them two dreams he had dreamt.



In the first dream, he saw himself and his brothers binding sheaves of grain in the field; "and lo, my sheaf arose and stood upright; and behold, your sheaves gathered round and bowed down to my sheaf."<sup>10</sup>

It was hard to miss the symbolism of that dream. Joseph expected to rule over his older brothers. The next dream was even more provoking. "Behold, I have dreamed another dream; and behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me."<sup>11</sup>

Obviously the sun and moon were Joseph's father and mother. Even indulgent old Jacob told his son to keep his dreams to himself.



*"Then they took Joseph's robe, and killed a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood;... and brought it to their father, and said, 'This we have found; see now whether it is your son's robe or not.'" (Gen 37: 31-32)*

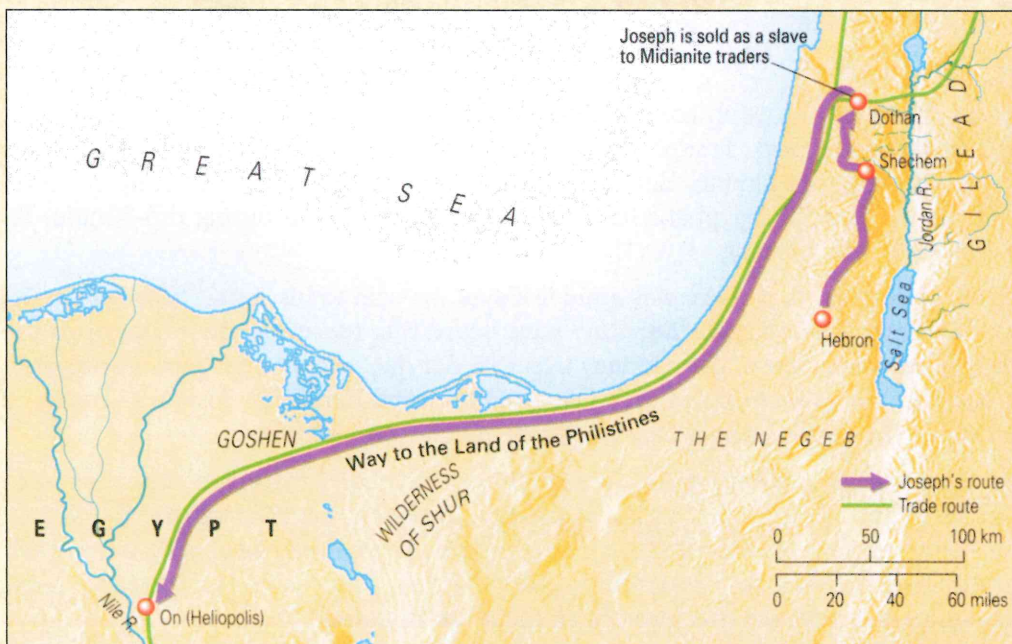
Joseph's brothers resented Joseph more and more. Finally when they were all together far out in the field, they saw Joseph coming toward them. They decided to kill him. "Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild beast has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams."<sup>12</sup>

Only Reuben, the eldest, was against the scheme, yet he didn't dare take on the others. Instead, he told them not to bring the guilt of bloodshed on themselves. They could just throw him into a pit. Reuben thought he could come back secretly later and rescue Joseph.

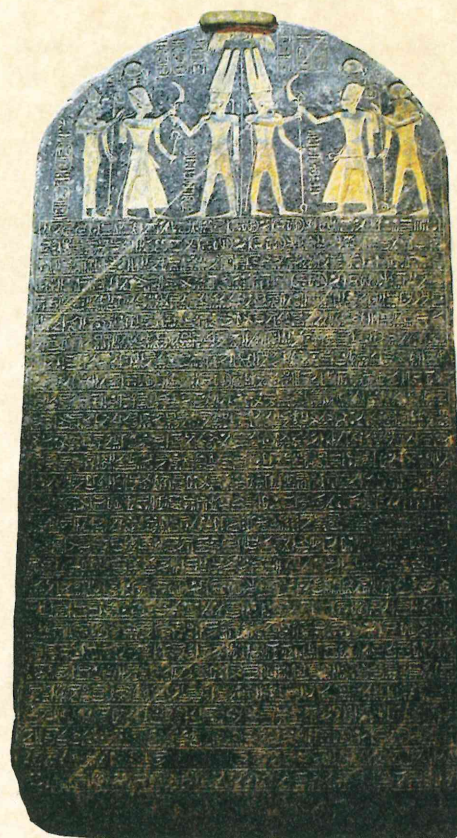
So they did it. But while Reuben was away, they saw a caravan of slave-traders coming toward them. Here was an opportunity to get rid of Joseph and make a profit at the same time. They sold him to the traders. When Reuben came back to the pit to rescue Joseph, the pit was empty. Jacob was left believing his favorite son was dead.

Joseph, meanwhile, ended up in Egypt.

## Joseph's Journey To Egypt As A Slave



Joseph Sold By His Brethren – “Then Midianite traders passed by; and they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver; and they took Joseph to Egypt.” (Gn 37: 28)



The Merneptah Stele, an Egyptian text, ca. 1230 B.C. mentions Israel—the first known occurrence of the term outside of the Bible.

## God Turns Evil Into An Instrument Of Salvation

**A**fter years of service, Joseph rose to become the prime minister to the Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. Inspired by God, Joseph was able to predict that seven years of plenty would be followed by seven years of famine. Under his wise government, Egypt stored up so much grain in the years of plenty that the Egyptians had more than enough food during the famine. The rest of the world, however, was starving.

**When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, “Why do you look at one another?” And he said, “Behold, I have heard that there is grain in Egypt; go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live, and not die.” So ten of Joseph’s brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph’s brother, with his brothers, for he feared that harm might befall him. (Gn 42:1-4)**

Foreigners who wanted to buy grain had to buy it through Pharaoh’s chief minister, Zaphenathpaneah. What Jacob’s sons did not know was that Zaphenathpaneah was the Egyptian name that Pharaoh had given to their brother Joseph. He recognized them right away: they were older, but they dressed and talked the way he remembered them. There they were, his brothers, bowing down before him—just as the dream had foretold all those years before.

Joseph, on the other hand, was dressed like an Egyptian nobleman and spoke Egyptian through an interpreter. It would probably also have been inexcusably bad etiquette to look directly at the Pharaoh’s prime minister.

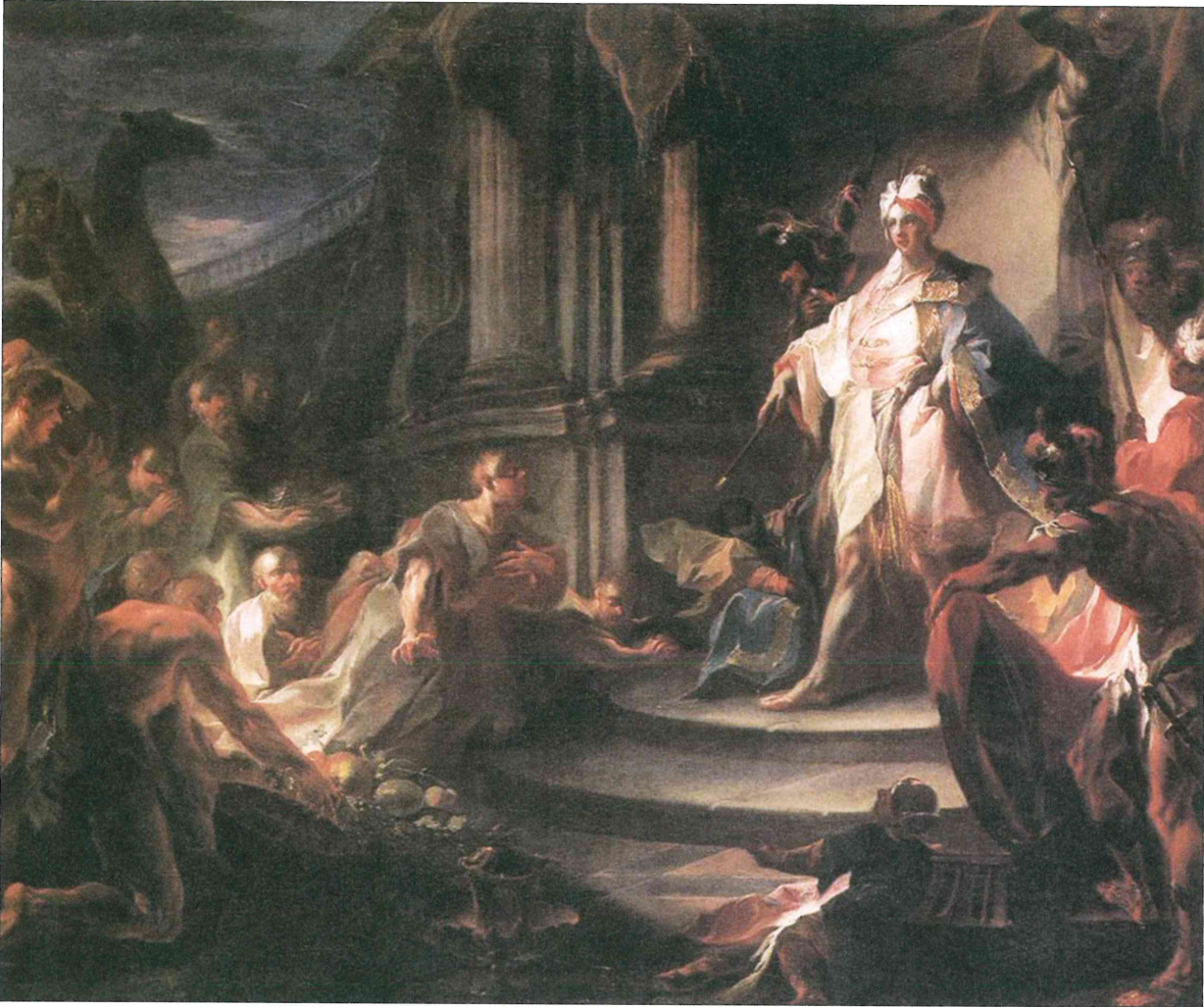
Joseph did not reveal himself right away. He played some tricks on his brothers, making them suffer a bit for what they had done to him. When he finally did decide to tell them who he was, they were afraid of him. After all, he was the second-most-powerful man in the world. If he wanted to take his revenge, he could. But Joseph reassured them. “And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.”<sup>13</sup>



God had managed to bring good out of evil. Joseph’s brothers had betrayed and sold him, but God had used that betrayal to save the whole family. For that reason, early Christians saw Joseph as a “type” of Christ. Jesus Christ also would be betrayed by his own people, and God would use that betrayal to save the very people who betrayed him.

Joseph correctly interpreted Pharaoh’s dreams. After seven years of growth, Egypt and nearby regions experienced a severe famine. But thanks to Joseph’s wise counsel and the Pharaoh’s foresight, the Egyptian people were prepared.





*“So Joseph said to his brothers, ‘Come near to me, I pray you.’ And they came near. And he said, ‘I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.’” (Gn 45: 4–5)*

In time we can discover that God in his almighty providence can bring a good from the consequences of an evil, even a moral evil, caused by his creatures: “It was not you”, said Joseph to his brothers, “who sent me here, but God... You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive” (Gn 45: 8; 50: 20; cf. Tb 2:12-18 (Vulg.)). From the greatest moral evil ever committed—the rejection and murder of God’s only Son, caused by the sins of all men—God, by his grace that “abounded all the more” (cf. Rom 5: 20), brought the greatest of goods: the glorification of Christ and our redemption. But for all that, evil never becomes a good. (CCC 312)

When Jacob heard that Joseph was still alive, he could hardly believe it. But God spoke to him in a vision once again, telling him to go down to Egypt. It was part of God’s plan.<sup>14</sup>

So Jacob went down to Egypt, and the whole family—seventy people, counting sons and grandsons—was reunited. Pharaoh gave Joseph’s family the best grazing land in the country, and they grew even richer. So, contrary to what we might have expected, the book of Genesis ends, not in the Promised Land of Canaan, but in the foreign land of Egypt.

SUPPLEMENTARY READING

**Tertullian, *An Answer to the Jews*, Ch. 10:**

Joseph, again, himself was made a figure of Christ in this point alone (to name no more, not to delay my own course), that he suffered persecution at the hands of his brethren, and was sold into Egypt, on account of the favor of God; just as Christ was sold by Israel (and therefore, according to the flesh, by his brethren) when he was betrayed by Judas.

**Commentary, *Genesis 45: 1-28***

The dénouement maintains the dramatic tone typical of the story so far. And now we are given the real reasons behind everything that Joseph, the wise man, has done. Once he makes himself known to his brothers, they interpret his behavior from their own, human, point of view—their fear of his vengeance (cf. v. 3 and later 50:15). Joseph explains that everything was part of God’s plan (cf. vv. 5-13). The generosity of the pharaoh was also a mark of divine mercy, but the greatest mercy of all is that Jacob has found the son he thought he lost (cf. v. 28).

As well as revealing God’s mercy, this history shows forth the greatness of Joseph, who, far from harboring rancor or even thinking of vengeance, directs all his actions to getting

back his brothers, leading them gradually to repent the sin they committed, forgiving them from the very start and treating them as the brothers they are. Joseph’s behavior is a model of how we should treat one another; forgiveness should be ever-present in our relationship with others. Pope John Paul II has written that “Society can become ‘ever more human’ only when we introduce into all the mutual relationships which form its moral aspect the moment of forgiveness, which is so much of the essence of the Gospel. Forgiveness demonstrates the presence in the world of *the love which is more powerful than sin*. Forgiveness is also the fundamental condition for reconciliation, not only in the relationship of God with man, but also in relationships between people. A world from which forgiveness was eliminated would be nothing but a world of cold and unfeeling justice, in the name of which each person would claim his or her own rights *vis-à-vis* others; the various kinds of selfishness latent in man would transform life and human society into a system of oppression of the weak by the strong, or into an arena of permanent strife between one group and another” (*Dives in misericordia*, 14).



With his father Jacob near death, Joseph brought his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim to be blessed by their grandfather. Paralleling Jacob’s blessing from Isaac, the old man blessed Ephraim, the younger of the two even though Joseph attempted to guide the hand to the head of the elder son, Manasseh.

## VOCABULARY

### CANAAN

The land God promised to Abraham's descendants. It covered about the same territory as modern Israel. Its inhabitants were idol-worshippers who sacrificed their own children in cult rituals.

### EGYPT

The ancient kingdom along the Nile River. During the time of the Patriarchs, Egypt was the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth.

### ESAU

The elder of Isaac and Rebekah's twin sons. The ancestor of the Edomites. He gave up his birthright for a bowl of Jacob's stew.

### ISRAEL

The name given to Jacob after he wrestled with God. Also the name of the nation descended from him.

### JACOB

The younger of Isaac and Rebekah's twin sons. He fooled his father into giving him the first-born's blessing, becoming Isaac's heir. Through him God renewed the covenant with Abraham's descendants.

### JOSEPH

Jacob's favorite among his twelve sons. His envious brothers sold him as a slave, but Joseph rose to become prime minister of Egypt, where he was ultimately able to save his family from starvation.

### PATRIARCH

A father who leads a family or tribe. Abraham and his descendants, the founders of Israel, are known as the Patriarchs.

### PHARAOH

The title of the king of Egypt.

### REBEKAH

Wife of Isaac, mother of Jacob and Esau. She plotted to gain Isaac's blessing for Jacob, her favorite.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Where did Isaac's wife Rebekah originate?
2. Who was Laban?
3. What were the blessings given to the first son?
4. For what price did Esau sell his birthright?
5. Why did Isaac bless Jacob instead of Esau?
6. Why did Jacob leave for his Uncle Laban's household?
7. How long did Jacob work for his uncle before he could marry Rachel?
8. How was it that Jacob became an unwilling polygamist?
9. What does the name "Israel" mean, according to the angel?
10. What does the Church say regarding the story of Jacob wrestling the angel?
11. Why did Joseph's brothers resent him?
12. Why did Joseph go to Egypt?
13. Who was Zaphenathpaneah?
14. According to the text, how is Joseph considered a "type" of Christ?
15. How can God deal with evil?

**PRACTICAL EXERCISES**

1. Reread the story found in this chapter where Esau gives up his birthright for some of Jacob's pottage. What does this story reveal about Esau's personality? What does it reveal about Jacob's personality? Many people become weak and fall into a life of sin because they cannot overcome their impulses and try to satisfy every desire. How might you better prepare yourself to be strong the next time you are tempted? What sacraments did Christ give to the Church to aid us?
2. Jacob gained his father's blessing by pretending he was Esau and deceiving his

father Isaac. Why do you think God still made him the founder of his chosen nation instead of Esau? What does that say about God's plan and its relationship with fallen humanity?

3. Joseph's brothers committed a terrible sin when they intended to leave Joseph for dead and then sold him into slavery in Egypt. God, however, used the situation to let Joseph assume a place of power in Egypt and eventually save his whole family from starvation. How does this story relate to the story of Noah? How does this story relate to the suffering and death of Jesus Christ?

**FROM THE CATECHISM**

**218** In the course of its history, Israel was able to discover that God had only one reason to reveal himself to them, a single motive for choosing them from among all peoples as his special possession: his sheer gratuitous love (cf. Dt 4: 37; 7: 8; 10: 15). And thanks to the prophets Israel understood that it was again out of love that God never stopped saving them and pardoning their unfaithfulness and sins (cf. Is 43: 1-7; Hos 2).

**287** The truth about creation is so important for all of human life that God in his tenderness wanted to reveal to his People everything that is salutary to know on the subject. Beyond the natural knowledge that every man can have of the Creator (cf. Acts 17: 24-29; Rom 1: 19-20), God progressively revealed to Israel the mystery of creation. He who chose the

patriarchs, who brought Israel out of Egypt, and who by choosing Israel created and formed it, this same God reveals himself as the One to whom belong all the peoples of the earth, and the whole earth itself; he is the One who alone "made heaven and earth" (cf. Is 43: 1; Ps 115: 15; 124: 8; 134: 3).

**707** Theophanies (manifestations of God) light up the way of the promise, from the patriarchs to Moses and from Joshua to the visions that inaugurated the missions of the great prophets. Christian tradition has always recognized that God's Word allowed himself to be seen and heard in these theophanies, in which the cloud of the Holy Spirit both revealed him and concealed him in its shadow.

**Endnotes**

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|-------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Gn 24: 14.     | 6. We use the alternate reading | 10. Gn 37: 7.     |
| 2. Gn 24: 17-19.  | given in a footnote in the      | 11. Gn 37: 9.     |
| 3. Gn 26: 34-35.  | Revised Standard Version.       | 12. Gn 37: 19-20. |
| 4. Gn 28: 1.      | 7. Gn 29: 17.                   | 13. Gn 45: 5.     |
| 5. See Gn 32: 10. | 8. Gn 30.                       | 14. Gn 46: 2-4.   |
|                   | 9. Gn 37: 3.                    |                   |