

Garments of Grace: Clothing Imagery in the Bible

The Coat of Different Colors

Lesson #4 for April 23, 2011

Scriptures: Genesis 29:21-30:24; 34; 37; 42:13; 1 Corinthians 9:24-26.

1. This story really begins when Isaac favored Esau and Rebekah favored Jacob. Eventually, that led to the deceit that Jacob practiced on his father claiming for himself the birthright which theoretically belonged to Esau. Not long thereafter, Jacob had to leave his home and the wrath of his brother, Esau. (Genesis 27,28)
2. In the land of his maternal ancestors, he found his uncle and fell in love with his cousin, Rachel. Arriving penniless, he was willing to work for seven years to win the hand of Rachel. But as Genesis reveals, when the seven years were completed, Laban gave him Leah instead of Rachel. We do not know the ages of either Leah or Rachel at that time. It is hard for us to imagine how Jacob could have been so deceived. Did God allow that because of Jacob's deceit of Isaac? Would you consider Jacob legally married to Leah? In God's eyes? When he woke up the next morning and realized he was in bed with the wrong woman, what should Jacob have done? How did Leah feel about that whole process? Where was Rachel? At age 84, Jacob was, no doubt, much older than either Leah or Rachel. What was Jacob's first response?
3. In order to understand a little bit more of the family history, consider the following information. Abraham sent Eleazar to get a wife for Isaac when Isaac was 40 years old. Twenty years later when Isaac was 60, he prayed to the Lord to help his wife get pregnant. She became pregnant and gave birth to Esau and Jacob. (Genesis 25:21,22,26) It was 77 years later that Jacob fled home to go to Heron. Isaac was already 137 years old. Seven years later at the age of 84, Jacob married Leah and one week later Rachel. Sometime during those 20 years of Jacob's absence from his father's home, Rebekah, his mother, died. Finally, at the age of 97, Jacob gathered his family, his wives—of which there were now four—and his children and started off for Canaan. Jacob's 10 oldest sons were mostly teenagers; his youngest son, Joseph, was probably seven or eight at that time. Benjamin had not been born yet.
4. What was included in the birthright that Jacob so desperately wanted? The birthright:
According to Hebrew law, provided for the eldest son to (1) succeed his father as the head of the family, and (2) inherit a double portion of his father's property (Deut 21:17; 2 Chr 21:3). The birthright also carried with it a blessing (Gen 27:1-4, 19, 36). . . In the event of a man's having more than one wife, the right was guaranteed to the first-born son in point of time, even if he should be the child of a less-loved wife (Deut 21:15-17). *SDA Bible Dictionary* entry for *Birthright*
5. Jacob was given his first wife (Leah) by deceit. He got his second wife (Rachel) by working 14 years for her. Those two wives each gave him a handmaid, Bilhah and Zilpah, in order to add to the number of children for whom they were credited. Should Jacob have put the brakes on all that polygamy earlier in his story? Should he have refused to accept Leah? Should he have refused to accept Bilhah and Zilpah? Should Jacob have been satisfied with Leah?
6. How many of the events included in the story so far where a direct result of God's guidance? Was God involved in the deceit of Isaac? Was God involved in the deceit of Jacob? Did God help Eleazar choose or find Rebekah for Isaac? How old was Rebekah when she chose to leave all of her acquaintances and go with that unknown servant to marry a cousin? Do we have to conclude that God was either involved in every decision or in none of them?
7. The sin of Jacob, and the train of events to which it led, had not failed to exert

an influence for evil—an influence that revealed its bitter fruit in the character and life of his sons. As these sons arrived at manhood they developed serious faults. The results of polygamy were manifest in the household. This terrible evil tends to dry up the very springs of love, and its influence weakens the most sacred ties. The jealousy of the several mothers had [209] embittered the family relation, the children had grown up contentious and impatient of control, and the father's life was darkened with anxiety and grief.—Ellen G White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 208,209.

8. Was it God's will that Jacob should have all four of those wives? If not, why are their sons names to be found on the gates of the New Jerusalem? (Revelation 21:12,13; Eze. 48.30-35)
9. A few years later, Rachel gave birth to Benjamin while they were traveling near Bethlehem. She apparently died in the process of childbirth. Because of that, Jacob had two sons without a mother; and the youngest son was a newborn. Who cared for Benjamin?
10. During those years, several things happened which help us to understand the family dynamics. Dinah—the only daughter of Leah—probably got tired of contending with 12 brothers and went to visit some girls in the neighboring village of Shechem. (Genesis 34) Unfortunately, the chief's son took a liking to her and—probably in line with the customs of his people—forced her to have sex with him. When Jacob heard about it, his sons were far away tending sheep. He was severely distressed but was not quite sure what to do. When his sons returned, they negotiated with the people of Shechem suggesting that if the men were all circumcised, they could be treated as brothers and allowed to intermarry with the family of Jacob. Three days later when the men were all very sore and hardly prepared for battle, the sons of Leah—Dinah's older brothers—sneaked into that village and killed everyone. That raised serious questions about the future safety of Jacob and his family in that area.
11. Also during that time, Joseph had become a teenager and was helping the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah to herd sheep. Why was Joseph working with those sons instead of Leah's sons? Were they closer to Joseph in age? Did Jacob think he was safer with these younger brothers? When those sons misbehaved, Joseph tried to remonstrate with them. When they would not listen to him, he reported to their father. (PP 209; Genesis 37:2) Which did not lead them to love him!
12. Two other things happened about that time which further strained family relations. Joseph had two dreams suggesting that he would eventually become a prince or king and the rest of the family members would be bowing down to him. (Genesis 37:5-11) His brothers were not happy!
13. While we might understand the rest of the circumstances, from a merely human perspective, did God make things worse by giving Joseph those dreams? Or, is it possible the dreams came from another source? Only God knew the future. This is a clear evidence of God's foreknowledge. God seldom gets to use His "plan A." Often, He has to move beyond even plan B or C. Did those dreams have anything to do with Joseph's brothers' determination to get rid of him or sell him into slavery? (Genesis 37:19,20)
14. After Rachel's death, Joseph became even closer to his father. Jacob, showing his favoritism for Joseph, had a very beautiful coat made for him. What do we know about that coat? That coat, a sort of tunic, probably had long sleeves and hung down below the knees, maybe even to the ankles. It may have been decorated with colorful patterns. Pictographs in Egypt from the time of Jacob show men of high rank wearing such clothing.
15. Looking at the words used to describe Joseph's coat and considering the history of others who wore such coats, some scholars suggest that such a coat would have made it impossible for Joseph to do much in the way of manual labor. Did Jacob intend for Joseph to be considered no longer a laborer but a mid-level manager? Was that because Joseph had demonstrated clear evidence of leadership?

16. Apparently, a short time after Joseph received that special coat suggesting his position of authority, he was asked by his father to go and see how his brothers were doing at Shechem. Shechem was a well-watered area and good for sheep. Remembering what his sons had done to the former inhabitants of Shechem after the rape of their sister, Jacob was no doubt worrying about them in that location. When Joseph reached Shechem, he could not find his brothers. He was told that they had gone on to Dothan. Joseph had probably walked more than 30 miles to reach the place where his brothers were watching the sheep.
17. As we know, the brothers saw Joseph coming. No doubt, the nature of his clothing gave him away from a long distance. While Joseph was still coming, they laid a deep plot to destroy him and prevent the fulfillment of his dreams. At first, they threw him into a pit, thinking he would die there. But, while Reuben—who had hoped to surreptitiously rescue the boy later—was gone away from the rest of the brothers, they pulled Joseph out of the pit and sold him to Ishmaelite/Midianite traders who were on their way to Egypt.
18. Ellen White suggests that Joseph's character was quite different from that of his brothers.
- There was one, however, of a widely different character—the elder son of Rachel, Joseph, whose rare personal beauty seemed but to reflect an inward beauty of mind and heart. Pure, active, and joyous, the lad gave evidence also of moral earnestness and firmness. He listened to his father's instructions, and loved to obey God. The qualities that afterward distinguished him in Egypt—gentleness, fidelity, and truthfulness—were already manifest in his daily life. His mother being dead, his affections clung the more closely to the father, and Jacob's heart was bound up in this child of his old age. He "loved Joseph more than all his children." [Genesis 37:3]—Ellen G White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 209.
19. On his way with the traders to Egypt, Joseph grew up. Ellen White says:
- For a time Joseph gave himself up to uncontrolled grief and terror. But, in the providence of God, even this experience was to be a blessing to him. He had learned in a few hours that which years might not otherwise have taught him. His father, strong and tender as his love had been, had done him wrong by his partiality and indulgence. . . . Faults had been encouraged that were now to be corrected. He was becoming self-sufficient and exacting. . . . Then his thoughts turned to his father's God. In his childhood he had been taught to love and fear Him. Often in his father's tent he had listened to the story of the vision that Jacob saw as he fled from his home an exile and a fugitive. He had been told of the Lord's promises to Jacob, and how they had been fulfilled—how, in the hour of need, the angels of God had come [214] to instruct, comfort, and protect him. . . . Now all these precious lessons came vividly before him. Joseph believed that the God of his fathers would be his God. He then and there gave himself fully to the Lord, and he prayed that the Keeper of Israel would be with him in the land of his exile.—Ellen G White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 213.1-3.
20. We need to remember that at the times of Jacob and Joseph, age was almost the sole criteria for determining status. Clearly, Joseph, almost the youngest son of Jacob, should not have been the one favored according to that criteria.
21. While Jacob was 108 years old when these events took place and Joseph was only 17 to 19, (Genesis 37:2) none of his brothers could have been more than 26 or 27 years old. Yet, the Scriptures speak of Joseph as if he was a lad compared to his brothers!
22. On their way to Egypt, the traders would have had to pass near the tent of Jacob somewhere near Hebron. Did Joseph beg them to take him to his father? Surely, his father would have paid more for him than they could ever get for him as a slave in Egypt! Were the traders afraid that Jacob might take revenge on them?

23. It is interesting to notice that these traders are called Ishmaelites/Midianites. Where did the Ishmaelites and the Midianites come from? Ishmael was a son of Hagar and Abraham. Midian was a son of Abraham and Keturah. (Genesis 25:1-4) All of these traders must have been close relatives of Joseph.
24. The next event that took place happened when the sons returned to their father in Hebron. Notice the words they used in addressing Jacob, "We found this; please examine it to see whether it is your son's tunic or not." (Genesis 37:31,32, *NASB*) Was that a lie? Did they intentionally falsify? Of course, we do not have the extended conversation which must have followed. No doubt, Jacob wanted to know exactly where they found the coat and under what circumstances. Did all the brothers stay together while they were talking to their father so there was no chance for them to give different stories about the events? Which is worse and more dangerous: an obvious deception or a careful counterfeit?
25. What happened to that coat? Did Jacob keep it as a reminder of his favorite son?
26. We remember that this whole saga began with a fight over Isaac's birthright. In fact, what Jacob really wanted was the spiritual birthright. He was happy to allow Esau to receive his father's wealth—which was all Esau wanted. So, in fact, when it came down to it, they both got what they wanted from the birthright. So, why are they still fighting!
27. Read Genesis 42:13,21-23,32; 44:28. What do we know about Potiphar? The rulers of Egypt in those days were Semitic foreigners known as Hyksos. Thus, racially, they were much closer to Joseph than they were to the Egyptians. That is why later when the Egyptians rose up and threw the Hyksos out, the new Pharaoh is described as one who "knew not Joseph." (Ex. 1:8)
28. If Potiphar had really believed his wife's story, Joseph would have lost his life. (*ST*, January 8, 1880 par. 6; *PP* 218) As we know, the story had a good ending. Joseph became master of Egypt. Try to imagine Joseph's roller-coaster emotional experience as he pretended to be an Egyptian master while they were speaking back and forth to each other through a translator. Of course, he understood every word. What happened when he said, "I am Joseph"?
29. Finally, after further testing his brothers, He invited his entire family to come to Egypt, and he established them in one of the most fertile areas of Egypt. Jacob was re-united with his favorite son. Because they were shepherds, they were kept separate from the Egyptians who despised shepherds. That allowed them to grow into a great nation instead of "melting into the Egyptian nation" which otherwise would likely have been the result. This separation was a result of Abraham's lie to Pharaoh some years before!
30. There are a lot of ups and downs in this story. Was God actively involved in every stage? Was He punishing vindictively, or perhaps, redemptively at times? Or, was God simply stepping back most the time and allowing consequences to work themselves out? One of Joseph's final tests for his brothers was the giving of rich gifts to Benjamin to carry back to Canaan and show his father. Apparently, the brothers had also matured—hopefully under the influence of their father—and they did not become jealous of Benjamin.
31. How often do we make rash decisions under the influence of emotional turmoil? How often do we allow emotions to control our actions?
32. What were the factors that led to Joseph's upright character so that he had the moral strength to survive the temptations in the house of Potiphar and the terrible treatment in the Egyptian prison? Are we more like Joseph? Or, more like Joseph's brothers?

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Appendix

33. Jacob was 147 when he died in Egypt. He had lived in Egypt 17 years. Genesis 47:28.
34. Joseph was 30 years old when he began to serve the king of Egypt. Genesis 41:46.
35. Jacob came to Egypt at the age of 130. Genesis 47:9.
36. Jacob came to Egypt in the second year of the famine after the seven good years. Genesis 45:6.
37. Thus Joseph was 39 when Jacob came to Egypt and Jacob was 130. So Joseph was born when Jacob was 91.
38. Joseph was born during the second seven years that Jacob was working for the hand of Rachel so Jacob could not have been younger than 77 when he arrived in Haran. Genesis 30:25.