

The Bible Story

GENESIS

Note: This is the Bible Story as a Grandpa told it. It was written for a grand-daughter who was only a few months old at the time, the dream being to finish the entire Bible by the time she was old enough to read it for herself. It has been written with two things in mind - that it's as accurate as possible, and readable, too. Details like "who begat whom" have been condensed or left out, but the rest of the story is here.

Chapter One - The new world....

There was a time long, long ago when God made our world, but something awful must have happened because it left the Earth in total darkness.

Water covered everything, water so deep and dark that nothing could live in it.

The Spirit of God was there all along, though, and one day, into that swirling mass of dark and damp, the Spirit brought light and swept the water into seas and oceans so that huge patches of dry land appeared.

A carpet of trees and flowers soon covered the land and a great fiery yellow ball shone from the sky to show up the plants in all their beauty. Toward evening, however, the sun began to fade and the sky turned black but a soft, white moon and millions of flickering stars peppered the darkness to brighten up the night. Then, as morning came, the sun peeped into view again, the moon and stars gave way to the sunlight and a bright new day began to dawn.

And what a morning it was! Birds filled the air with song and huge splashes in the seas and oceans told of new and massive water creatures now roaming their dappled depths. Day then turned into night again, but up came the sun for a brand new morning and this time there were strange new noises echoing across the land, as thousands of animals great and small squeaked, squawked, whistled and grunted in their calls to each other and in search of mates to have babies with.

It was an amazing new world of beauty and variety, but there was one creature God had made that stood out from all the others, because this creature would be just like him. It was a human being, a man. He didn't look like much compared to the strength and beauty of the other animals, but it was to this man that God said, "All that you see around you, this entire world, is all yours, my friend. I made it all for you and for your children." And with that last job done, God rested.

Chapter 2 - The first man and woman....

God was able to take a rest because everything worked just wonderfully. To keep all the plants, trees and animals alive, for instance, God had provided an endless supply of water bubbling up from under the ground. It was out of this very same ground that God created the first human, too - right out of the dirt we stand on!

When the man first appeared there was no sign of life in him, but God filled his lungs with air and suddenly the man's eyes popped open and Adam, the first human, was alive! Without food, of course, Adam wouldn't have stayed alive very long, so God planted a garden for Adam in a place called Eden, full of fruit trees, all of which were his to enjoy.

All, that is, except one....just one.

It was called the The Knowledge of Good and Evil tree. It was easy to see because there it stood, right in the middle of the garden. It was very attractive, too. The fruits looked delicious. But the tree was so deadly and the fruit was so dangerous that God took the man to the tree himself to warn him about it. "Listen to me, Adam," God said, "If you eat the fruit on this tree, it will kill you. So, don't eat it. Don't even touch it."

Adam had been warned: steer clear of the Tree of Death. With the warning given, God then gave Adam the job of naming all the animals and birds - and to choose one for a companion.

Well, all the creatures were lovely in their own way, but to Adam's disappointment there wasn't one among the lot of them that he felt any sort of special attachment to. They just weren't human enough. What Adam needed was another human, so while he slept, God took one of Adam's ribs and shaped the kind of companion he knew Adam would love, because this time God made a woman!

When Adam woke up and saw her, his eyes lit up at her beauty. She was perfect! They married and as husband and wife the whole world was now theirs to share and enjoy together, and being naked didn't worry Adam and Eve at all.

Chapter 3 - Don't eat off that tree!....

Adam and Eve soon had a worry coming, though, because in the garden with them was a dragon-like creature of terrible cunning. The dragon could talk, too.

He found Eve alone one day and asked her, "Is it true, Eve, that God told you not to eat from any of the trees in the garden?"

"Oh yes, it's true all right," Eve replied, "God told us we can eat whatever we like off all the trees in the garden, except that one there in the middle, the Knowledge of Good and Evil Tree. We only have to touch that one and God said we'd die."

"Die?" the dragon replied, looking aghast, "Why would God say a thing like that when knowing good and evil makes you just like him?"

The dragon had a point, Eve thought. If eating the fruit made them as wise as God, what could be wrong with that? And the fruit looked so good, too! How could anything as delicious-looking as that be bad for them?

So she reached up and touched one of the fruits - and just as the dragon said, she didn't die. She pulled the fruit off the tree and took a great big bite. Still nothing happened, so off she went to find her husband and got him to take a bite, too. And he didn't fall down dead after eating the fruit, either.

But suddenly they both felt ashamed at being naked. It hadn't worried them before but it did now. So they scampered off into the shrubbery to find some underwear and came up with fig leaves, of all things!

Things quickly went from bad to worse. As the soft breeze of the evening began to drift through the garden, Adam and Eve picked up the sound of footsteps.

It was God.

For the first time in their lives, they felt fear. "Quickly, let's hide," Adam whispered, so off they hid, but God started calling to them, "Adam, Eve, where are you?"

Oh no, God was actually looking for them! Now what? Well, he was obviously going to find them eventually, so Adam crawled out of his hiding place to face him.

"Ah, there you are," Adam said, trying to sound normal, "I thought I heard the sound of your footsteps. Now, if you're wondering why I didn't come out to meet you, it's because I - er - well - I - um - didn't think it was right being seen with no clothes on."

"Not right being seen with no clothes on?" God replied, sounding surprised, "Who on earth put that silly idea into your head?"

"It's that woman you gave me, it was all her fault," the man replied, pointing a finger at Eve, "she got me eating the fruit you said we shouldn't eat and that's when I got the idea in my head."

God turned to confront Eve. "My dear lady, what have you done?"

“Oh no, it wasn’t my fault,” Eve replied quickly, “it was that dragon creature who fooled me into eating it.”

“Ah, the devil made you do it, did he? I see,” God said.

So God turned to the serpent next. “Well, dragon, since you were the main cause of this horrible mess, I’m going to put a curse on you. From now on you will be at war with this woman and her children and you will cause them much grief. But one day, I promise you, they will strike you dead.”

“And Eve,” God continued, “because you believed the dragon’s lie, women are going to face a tough time as mothers bearing children and an even tougher time being married to overbearing husbands. And because of you, Adam, doing what your wife, not I, wanted you to do, men are going to work like dogs to make a living and support their families. Life will be one endless grind, with only death to look forward to - but you came from the ground in the beginning, so back to that ground you’ll go in the end.”

Poor Adam and Eve. Life had been perfect and now it was a mess. But one good thing had come out of it - there were no more fig leaves for underwear because God had made them clothes out of soft, silky leather, which felt much, much better.

They would need those leather clothes, though, because God was about to kick them out of the Garden of Eden to survive on their own. He couldn’t let them stay because they might discover the other tree he’d created, the Tree of Life, and if they ate the fruit off that tree, it would give them life for ever. If they’d chosen that tree first, of course, it would’ve been grand, but to eat off it now would only extend their miserable lives into eternity.

It was time, therefore, to let them experience life without a loving, trusting relationship with God, and see what kind of world they ended up with instead. And in case they tried to sneak back into Eden and grab a fruit off the Tree of Life, God placed a powerful angel with a swirling, flashing sword on the path that led to it. No way would Adam and Eve get past him.

Chapter 4 - Out in the cold....

Outside Eden, Adam and Eve set about the task of coping by themselves. For food, Adam had to plant his own garden, and they also had sheep. Cain, their firstborn boy, looked after the garden, while Abel, their second boy, looked after the sheep.

But even their new life out in the cold was shattered as well, when Cain got so angry he killed his brother in a heated dispute over the gifts they had brought for God. Cain had offered a few average-looking vegetables from his garden but Abel had offered the best lamb he had.

Cain’s gift looked so pathetic compared to Abel’s that Cain was furious being shown up like that. Off he stomped in an ugly mood but God caught up with him and asked him, “Cain, my boy, why are you so angry? Look at you, you’re in an awful state, and you know why, don’t you? Because ugly moods are just waiting to consume you the moment you resist what you know is right. You could’ve given me your best and I would’ve accepted it, but you didn’t, did you? No, you let your pride get the better of you. Well, some time, son, you’d better learn to master it or these ugly moods you get will take complete control of you.”

God was right, because weird and awful thoughts filled Cain’s mind. Anger turned to hatred, but what hatred turned into was even more frightening. Cain hated his brother so much he wanted to kill him. It seemed like a great solution, though. Get rid of Abel and the pain would

stop. "Yes, that's it," Cain said to himself, in sick delight, "I'll ask Abel out for a walk and when we're out of sight, I'll kill him."

So out they went for a walk together, but only Cain came back.

There was no sign of Abel.

Seeing Cain return alone, God asked him if he knew where his brother was. "How should I know?" Cain said gruffly, "Am I his shepherd?"

"Oh, Cain," God said, with sadness in his voice, "what have you done? You killed your brother, didn't you? Yes, the very ground where you spilled Abel's blood cries out that you have. In that case you must leave this place immediately and never come back. The desert is where you belong now, so be off with you, Cain - and watch your back too, in case there's someone on your trail wanting to kill you like you killed your brother."

Cain was shocked. "That's not fair, you're punishing me way too much," he cried. "How can I survive in conditions like that, wandering round the desert in constant fear of people wanting to slit my throat?"

"Oh, I'll make sure that no one actually kills you," God replied, "In fact, anyone who even threatens you will have to deal with me and I'll give him seven times worse what he gives you. Word will soon get around that you're a dangerous man to tangle with. You're in for a tough life, though, because food will be hard to find, and who's going to be interested in helping you?"

So, Cain left his parents and lived in the land called Nod. He eventually built a small town for his family, which he named after his firstborn son, Enoch.

Adam and Eve had another baby boy, named Seth, a gift from God to replace their dead son, Abel. They had many more babies, which they could because Adam lived for 930 years, but eventually he died just as God said he would. So did Methuselah, the longest living person ever, who lived for 969 years.

Seth, meanwhile, had his own children, who had their own children, who also had children and on and on it went, but in among all those children there was one very special boy, another boy called Enoch, who trusted God and loved him. He was only 365 years old when God took him away and he was never seen again. It must've been a great relief for Enoch because it was back-breaking work trying to grow enough food to eat, thanks to the curse Adam had brought on them all for eating off the wrong tree.

But then another special boy was born, called Noah, of whom it was said, "This boy Noah is going to bring us relief from the curse," which sounded marvellous, but after 500 years all Noah had come up with was three sons of his own, Shem, Ham and Japheth, and still no escape from the daily grind.

Life was tough but that didn't stop the baby girls growing up into mature women and mothers. They had a lot of babies, too, all of which could live up to 900 years or more, so the world soon filled up with people.

Most of them, however, were horrible. There wasn't one good thought among the lot of them and the violence they did to each other was awful. It got so bad that even God said, "Right, that's it, I've had my fill of this lot, I wish I'd never created people in the first place. I'm going to wipe this whole mess right off the face of the earth. And it won't just be the people; I won't leave an animal, bird or insect alive, either." Was God ever angry.

He tells all this to Noah too, because Noah was the one good man left on earth who really loved him. "Very soon, Noah," God said, "I'm going to cause a massive flood. I want you to get busy, therefore, and build a boat 30 houses long, 5 houses wide and 3 houses high, and it had better not leak. You and your family will live safe and sound in that boat during the flood, and if

you're wondering why the boat is so big, it's because you're sharing it with a male and female of every animal and bird, along with all their food, and your food, too."

Unlike Adam and Eve, Noah trusted God. A boat that big would be a huge undertaking but Noah didn't hesitate or argue. He got to work as soon as he could, and the building of the Ark began.

Chapter 5 - Surviving the flood....

After years of hard work and constant mockery from neighbours for building a boat in the middle of a desert, the day finally came when God told Noah, "In a week's time the flood begins and for 40 days the rain is going to pelt down, so get that family of yours on board the Ark with all those animals, because only those in the Ark will be left alive."

All during that week the animals came two by two to the Ark until they were all comfortably settled down in their strange new home. Noah lifted the ramp, closed the door and God sealed it shut on the outside.

Smack on target, at week's end, the rain came pouring down. Rumbblings could be heard from under the ground, too, as water rushed to the surface and exploded in huge fountains high into the air. Rivers burst their banks, ponds became lakes, lakes became seas and just as the water was nibbling at the treetops, a tremor shuddered through the Ark as the great boat and its precious cargo began to lift off the ground, creaking and rocking in the waves but floating perfectly without a leak in sight.

Outside the Ark, the hills and mountains were now full of desperate people and animals trying to escape the rising water. But even the mountain tops began to disappear, until there was no place left to go. The strongest animals and people survived in the water for a few more hours, but one by one they slipped below the waves.

Still the water rose until every mountain top was covered and the cries for help fell silent.

The rain finally stopped, the wind died down and the only sound that could be heard was the waves gently slapping against the sides of the Ark. Otherwise all was quiet, so very, very quiet, and it stayed that way for weeks.

It was wonderful being safe but five months cooped up in a tightly sealed Ark full of smelly animals would soon make life unbearable, so God stirred up the wind to blow dry the water away. Five months to the day a shudder rippled through the Ark again, as the great boat touched down and gently creaked into its resting place high on a mountain. Noah waited another 40 days and for a whole week he sent out a raven, then a dove, to see what they would do. They kept on returning to the Ark every night, which meant the land wasn't dry enough yet for anything to grow and provide food for them.

But one evening, the dove fluttered through the Ark's open hatch with an olive leaf in her beak. Another week later she didn't come back to the Ark at all.

The land must be dry enough for plants to grow again, Noah thought, so he broke the seal on the Ark's door and lowered it.

He was right, because all around the Ark the land was dry.

They'd spent more than a year inside the walls of that Ark so it was a welcome sound to hear God calling to them, "Come on out, my friends, and bring all the birds and animals with you. The earth is now theirs to roam as they please and may they have many babies to fill up the earth with life again!"

In thanks to God for saving their lives, Noah sacrificed several birds and animals from among those he had seven pairs of, which pleased God immensely, so much so that God said “I will never curse the ground or wipe out life like that again, despite the rottenness of the human heart. While the earth remains, so will seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, and day and night.”

So, there they were, looking out on this brand new world stretching out before them, when God said to Noah, “All this is now yours, Noah, every animal, fish, bird, insect, plant and tree, they’re all yours to supply everything you and your children need. I want you to remember one thing, though. When you eat meat, don’t eat it raw with the blood still red in it, because blood pictures life. Blood and life go hand-in-hand. It’s the same for you, too. If you didn’t have blood you’d be dead, and if you bleed heavily enough, you’ll die. Not eating blood, then, will remind you of how much life depends on it, and how much I value life, as well. I value the lives of all my creatures, but of all those creatures it’s your lives I value most because I created you to be like me, so any animal or human causing you injury, I will demand their blood for your blood. Blood for blood and life for life. But never again will I kill off all life in a Flood again, and every time you see a rainbow that’s proof I’m sticking to my promise, no matter how bad things get.”

To their great relief, Noah and his family found this new world after the Flood much easier to grow things in. Before long Noah had grown enough grapes to make homemade wine, but one day he drank so much he got drunk and collapsed on his bed completely naked.

His youngest son, Ham, found him lying there all drunk and naked, but instead of covering him over with a blanket, he called in his two brothers, Shem and Japheth, to take a peek, too. But they wouldn’t. Instead, they found a coat, and placing it over their shoulders, they backed into Noah’s tent, crept backwards up to his bed and gently placed the coat over him.

When Noah found out what Ham had done, he was furious and cursed Ham’s son Canaan to a life of slavery to the families of Shem and Japheth. It was another horrible mess bringing on yet more curses, but life went on, with Noah living another 350 years after the Flood, until he was 950 years old.

Chapter 6 - The great promise to Abram....

Then along came Nimrod, one of Ham’s grandsons, who had a fearsome reputation as a brilliant hunter. He could kill animals better than anyone, which back then must have been important because Nimrod became a powerful leader over several cities in the land called Shinar.

It was in one of his cities that more trouble began. The cityfolk wanted to build a city in the shape of a huge tower, the tallest tower ever made, because, they said, “an enormous tower reaching the clouds will make the city so famous that everybody will want to live in it.”

They were right. Their tower city worked so well that even God came down to take a look.

He wasn’t happy with what he saw, though. "If this is what they can accomplish by getting everyone together and all speaking the same language, they'll soon get to thinking there's nothing they can't do, and who knows what they'll get up to then? But if I mix up their languages and they haven't got a clue what each other is saying, where will their lofty plans go then?!"

They soon found out because the result was total chaos, so much so they even named the city “Babel,” meaning "confusion." Most of the residents eventually packed up and left and the dream of their towering city crumbled into a memory and nothing more.

Ham and his family clearly spelt trouble but something wonderful was about to happen to one of Shem's descendants, a man called Abram. He and his father, his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot, had all left their homeland in Ur of the Chaldees and settled down in Harran, which is where God had an amazing surprise waiting for him.

"Abram," God said, "I want you to leave this part of the country because I'm taking you to a place called Canaan where I'm going to make a great nation of you, so great that everyone around the world will wish they could be just like you."

So off they went, Abram, Sarai and Lot with all their luggage, their animals and their helpers, but no excited cries from Abram's and Sarai's children because Sarai couldn't have children. That wasn't their only problem, though, because on arrival in Canaan they found the land was in the grip of a ferocious famine. The land was horribly dry and food was scarce, so they packed everything up and headed for Egypt instead.

Just as he was about to enter Egypt, Abram began to wonder if this was a good idea after all, because Sarai was very beautiful and if the Egyptians found out she was his wife, they might slit his throat to get rid of him. "On the other hand," he said to Sarai, "if they think you're my sister, there's no reason for them to kill me, is there? So, would you do that for me, pretend you're my sister and not my wife, for both our sakes?"

Abram's fears were well grounded. The Egyptians were so dazzled by Sarai's beauty that word soon got back to Pharaoh's palace. Several princes from the palace galloped off to check Sarai for themselves and nearly fell off their horses when they saw her. She was stunning! They shot straight back to Pharaoh, who decided to go take a look, too. On seeing her he was so impressed he invited her back to the palace and treated both her and Abram to the best he had to offer. He gave sheep, cattle, donkeys, camels and even servants to Abram, which gave Abram the chance to build up his stock of animals very nicely indeed.

But God wasn't about to let this little game of pretence go on for ever. Suddenly, Pharaoh and his family all came down with a horrible illness. And when Pharaoh discovered it was God punishing them for taking Sarai into his home, he was livid.

"Abram," he yelled painfully, "how could you do this to us? Why didn't you tell me Sarai was your wife? Why this dumb idea about her being your sister, because here I took her into my home and look at my family now. We could have all died because of you. I'm very angry with you, so I want you out of my country right now, Abram, and take her with you," and without more ado he ordered his palace staff to hurry Abram, Sarai and all that they owned, out of Egypt.

It was quite a trail they made on their way back to Canaan because by this time Abram was a very rich man, rich both in cattle and in silver and gold. So was his nephew Lot, in fact they had so much between them, that the land couldn't support both of them and all their animals together.

Quarrels soon broke out between Abram's and Lot's herdsmen, that became so heated that Abram eventually told Lot, "We can't go on like this, we're family, so before things get any worse, let's split up and go our separate ways - you choose first where you want to go and I'll go in the opposite direction."

The choice for Lot was easy. To the east the land was like the Garden of Eden, so he and his family settled down near the city of Sodom, while Abram and his family settled down in Canaan.

After Lot left, God met with Abram again and made another amazing promise.

"Look all around you Abram," God said, "as far as your eye can see, because I'm giving all this land to you and your descendants for ever. And if you're wondering how many descendants you're going to have, then start counting all the specks of dust you can see on the ground around

our feet here. There are millions, right? Well, that's how many descendants you're going to have. So, take a good look at this land I'm giving you and see what you think of it."

Abraham was delighted.

Lot, however, was in trouble. He'd been caught up in a war between several kings and been taken prisoner. His own king, the king of Sodom, had joined forces with four neighbouring kings to head off an invasion by four other kings who were rampaging through the countryside destroying everything in their path. It was five of them against four of the enemy. They met in fierce battle in the valley of Siddim, but the four invading kings were far more powerful.

Behind the five defending kings was a very nasty patch of oily ground, where many of their men became hopelessly stuck. It was an awful mess and the few who didn't get stuck ran for the hills. With no one left to defend Sodom, the four triumphant kings carted everything out of the city they could lay their thieving hands on, including Lot and all his possessions.

Abram first heard the grim news of the battle lost and his nephew captured from one of the few bedraggled survivors who'd managed to escape. Abram quickly mustered an army of 318 men, found out where the four kings were camped and that night he surrounded them. They swooped down on the enemy camp while they were all fast asleep, creating total havoc.

The few who managed to escape found Abram's men hot on their heels all the way north beyond Damascus. Back at the camp, all the prisoners were set free and they all returned home with their possessions intact.

The king of Sodom met Abram on the way back to thank him personally. He wasn't the only king at that time to meet with Abram, though.

There was another great king called Melchizedek, the king of Salem and God's very own priest, who dropped by with some food and wine for Abram. Over the meal he told Abram he had something very special to tell him. "You, Abram, are being personally blessed by the Creator of the entire Universe, God Almighty himself. It's thanks to him that you won that battle so easily."

To express his thanks to God, Abram gave Melchizedek one tenth of all the treasure he'd captured in the battle. There was more treasure to come, too, because in thanks to Abram for rescuing them, the King of Sodom offered him all his animals. But Abram wasn't interested.

"May the great God of the Universe be my witness," Abram told the king, "I will not take anything that's yours because if I accept what you're offering you might get to thinking it was you, not God, who made me rich. But I will accept what you owe me for the use of my men."

Soon after this God spoke to Abram in a vivid dream. "Abram," he said, "don't you ever fear anybody or anything from here on out, because I'll always be with you as your shield and defender. And don't forget my promise to reward you and your descendants, either."

Which was all very nice, Abram thought, but how can my descendants receive a reward from God when I don't have any descendants?!

"Great God," he said aloud, "why are you making these incredible promises to my family down through the ages when I haven't got any children of my own yet?"

"Don't you worry about that," God replied, "that's easy to solve - trust me. See all those stars up there? Too many to count, right? Then trust me Abram, because that's how many descendants you're going to have. Just trust me."

"All right," Abram said, "I trust you," which pleased God immensely! "Abram is such a good man," God said to himself.

But being a good man didn't prepare Abram for what happened next.

As the sun was setting, Abram felt a strange and terrible darkness overwhelm him, and somewhere in the depths of the darkness he could hear God tell him, "Abram, I'm afraid it's going to be black like this for your descendants for four hundred years. You won't be part of it yourself, you'll live to a ripe old age in peace, but your descendants will be slaves all those years in a foreign country. I promise it won't last forever, though. One day they'll escape with all kinds of treasure and come right back here again where they belong."

The darkness then melted away. But just as the sun disappeared over the horizon, a fireball roared out of the sky and lit up the area where Abram stood in a blaze of smoke and flame, which really got Abram's attention for what God said next.

"Look me in the eye, Abram," God said. "I give you my word in solemn but certain promise that all this land, from the river Nile in the west to the river Euphrates in the east, will belong to your descendants. I will never go back on my word. I promise."

Chapter 7 - Hagar and Ishmael...

But God had a funny way of fulfilling his promise, Abram thought, because no matter how hard Abram and Sarai tried to have children over the next 10 years, there was no happy bulge of pregnancy.

Sarai came up with an idea, though. What if Abram got their Egyptian slave-girl Hagar pregnant and Sarai could adopt Hagar's son, instead?

So, Abram did exactly what Sarai suggested, but what a surprise they both got when Hagar began treating Sarai horribly. She strutted around, boasting all the time about Abram getting her pregnant and not Sarai.

Despite a strong complaint from Sarai, Abram refused to do anything about Hagar's boasting. So Sarai took things into her own hands and treated Hagar so badly that eventually Hagar couldn't take it any longer and she ran away.

God caught up with Hagar while she was resting by a well.

"Hagar, where on earth do you think you're going in your condition? You're several months pregnant, remember? Look, I know Sarai is giving you a rough time, but I want you to go back home and give birth to this son of yours and call him Ishmael, meaning 'God hears,' to remind you that I was aware of your despair. I promise you Ishmael will have many descendants - and you'll be pleased to hear he'll give as good as he gets from Sarai's family. Don't you worry, he'll survive just fine."

Hagar was so shocked that God himself was talking to her, she wondered aloud if she'd see another day!

But true to God's word, Ishmael was born and by the time he was a strapping 13 year old, Abram was 99, and that was the year God had another announcement to make.

"From now on," God told Abram, "I'm calling you Abraham. It means 'father of many nations,' so that your name will also remind you of the promise I made, that nations and kings will come from you. And never will I forget my promise. I will always be with your family down through the generations. But you have a part to play here, too. Whenever a baby boy is born, I want his parents to wait eight days and then have the foreskin on the boy's penis cut off. That will mark him for life with the sign of my promise. Any boy who isn't circumcised like that won't be part of my promise. So all the men and boys had better get themselves circumcised right away, to seal this agreement between us. Oh, and congratulations by the way, Sarai's

pregnant! She's going to be a mother - because we need a mother to produce all these nations and kings, don't we?! So, don't call her Sarai anymore, she's now Sarah your princess!"

You'd think Abraham would be delighted with this news, but in his mind how could an old geezer like him, pushing a hundred years old, have a child now? And Sarah his new princess? She was already ninety. The old girl was way past that sort of thing!

He tried getting God to bless Ishmael instead, but God would have none of it.

"No, Abraham. In one year's time that wife of yours is going to have a son, and, what's more, you're going to call him Isaac, meaning 'laughter' because I heard you snickering away behind my back. Don't worry, I'll bless Ishmael too, he'll have 12 princes for sons, but my promise to you gets passed on down through Isaac's family, not Ishmael's."

With that made abundantly clear, God left, which meant, perish the thought, it was time for all the men and boys to be circumcised, including Abraham!

Several sore months later, Abraham was relaxing at the entrance to his tent, when, through the heat haze, he saw three men approaching. He could sense they were no ordinary visitors so he begged them to come and relax in the shade of the trees and stay for a meal, and he would serve them himself.

So there they all were, sitting comfortably in the shade, when one of the men casually asked Abraham where his wife was.

"Oh, she's back there somewhere in the tent, I think," Abraham replied.

"Good," the man said, "Would you mind telling her when you see her that this time next year we'll be back and by then she'll have a bouncing baby boy of her own."

Sarah, who'd been hiding just inside the tent listening in, nearly burst out laughing. I mean how could two old boots like her and Abram have children at their age? Chortling away to herself, she nearly choked when one of the visitors yelled out, "Hey, Sarah, what's the big joke, eh? Do you think it's too tough for me, God, to provide you with a son?"

Sarah nearly fainted with fright on the spot, but managed to poke her head out and squeak, "Who, me? Oh no, I wasn't laughing, no, no I wouldn't do that."

"Oh, wouldn't you?" God chuckled, "well let's see if you'll be laughing in a year's time, shall we?"

Chapter 8 - Sodom and Gomorah....

Next stop for God and the two angels was the city of Sodom.

As Abraham walked along with them, God was mulling some thoughts over in his mind, "I wonder if we should we tell Abraham what we're planning to do when we get to Sodom and Gomorrah. He won't like it but I can't bless Sodom and Gomorrah like I'm going to bless him. From what we've been told, those two cities are so evil we had to come here to find out for ourselves if it's even possible to be that bad."

It was a quiet trip, which made Abraham sense something awful was about to happen. When they reached the last stretch of road heading down into Sodom, Abraham had concluded the worst. "You're going to wipe out Sodom, aren't you?" he blurted out, "But surely you're not going to kill the innocent people in the city, are you? How could you do that? Look, what if there are fifty innocent people left in the city, would you spare it then? Wouldn't the great judge of the earth, who only does what is right and proper, do that? Wouldn't he? Would he kill the innocent along with the wicked? Far be it from you, my Lord."

“All right,” God said, “if there are fifty innocent people, I’ll spare the city for their sake.”

“In that case,” Abraham said, “may I be so bold as to ask, knowing full well that I’m nothing more than a pile of dust and ashes myself, if you would spare the city for forty five innocent people?”

“Forty five innocent people? Yes, I’ll go for forty five,” God said.

“And if I found forty innocent people?” Abraham asked nervously.

“Yes, I’ll even spare the city for forty,” God replied. So, Abraham mused, God was willing to bargain a bit, was he? It was worth another try, then.

“Please don’t be angry with me,” Abraham pleaded, “but suppose there were only thirty innocent people, would you spare the city for them?”

“Yes, I will,” God said.

“For twenty?” Abram asked, wincing slightly at his boldness.

“Yes,” God said.

Gaining courage now, Abraham tried for ten. “Yes, I’ll even spare Sodom if you can find just ten innocent people,” God said, “but ten is my limit. Now please go home Abraham, we’ve got business to attend to.”

When the two angels slipped into Sodom later that evening, Lot was sitting by the city gate, and on seeing them he invited them to spend the night at his home. When they declined his offer, Lot begged them to stay with him because he knew they’d be in serious trouble in that city on their own.

He was right.

Word soon spread around the city that the two strangers were in town and were staying with Lot. Late that night a noisy crowd gathered outside the house and began yelling to Lot to send the strangers out to them so they could sexually assault them.

Lot was so petrified, all he could think of saying was, “Look, I’ve got two virgin daughters, you can do what you like to them but not to these two men, they are my guests and under my protection.”

“Stand aside, foreigner,” they yelled even louder, “what right have you got to tell us what we can and cannot do? Hey, maybe we’ll do to you what we intend to do to them.”

They shoved Lot up against the door but just when the door was about to cave in, the two angels pulled Lot inside, slammed the door and blinded anyone on the outside who was close to it, which soon pushed the crowd back.

The situation was clearly desperate so there was no time to lose. “If you have any relatives in the city, Lot, now is the time to get them to leave,” one of the angels said, “warn them that God sent the two of us to destroy the city - and just hope they listen.”

But none of Lot's relatives were the least bit interested in leaving and the angels even had to grab Lot, his wife and two daughters by the hand and drag them out to get them to leave, too. That meant there were only four innocent people in Sodom, six short of God’s limit to save the city, but God wanted those four, at least, kept alive.

Safely outside the city, the angels yelled to the remaining four to run for their lives and not look back until they’d reached the far off hills. Lot knew his ageing legs would never make it that far in time so the angels agreed to let him take cover in Zoar, a small town nearby meaning “little.”

The angels waited until Lot and his family were entering Zoar and then the sky poured down its fury of fire, instantly destroying Sodom and Gomorrah, killing every man, beast, tree and plant throughout the entire plain.

Lot's wife, meanwhile, ignored the angels' command not to look back. She just had to watch the fireworks, but as she turned to look she felt her entire body crystallize instantly into salt. There she stood, a solid monument of pure salt and nothing else. Lot and his two daughters were now the only three survivors of the holocaust that fell upon Sodom.

Early next morning Abraham set out to view the destruction from the very spot where he'd bargained with God to save the innocent. The whole plain was covered in thick black smoke but he knew at least that Lot was safe.

Lot, however, didn't feel safe at all and he'd hightailed it into the hills with his two daughters where they set up home in a cave. By now Lot was an old man, with no wife and no sons anymore, so his two daughters got him drunk two nights in a row and both of them managed to get themselves pregnant by him to keep the family name alive. It was a desperate measure and one that God would not approve of.

But Abraham wasn't doing much better in his own desperation, though. While passing through King Abimelech's domain, Abraham fell back on his old game of pretending Sarah was his sister, just in case Abimelech took a fancy to Sarah, too.

And just as Abraham suspected, Abimelech was immediately smitten by Sarah's beauty and he would've married her as well, but God came to the rescue in the nick of time yet again, this time threatening the king in a dream with death for him and his entire family if he dared treat Sarah like a wife.

"But I had no idea she was Abraham's wife," Abimelech protested to God in the dream.

"Yes I know," God replied, "that's why I wouldn't let you touch her, but if you're thinking of keeping her, then be prepared to die. And until this whole mess is settled, none of the women in your household will be able to have children of their own, either"

Next morning, Abimelech hurriedly gathered all his palace staff together and told them what God would do to them if they went ahead with the wedding plans. They were so scared that the king immediately called for Abraham, demanding to know what on earth the silly man thought he was doing.

"Can you tell me as you stand there, Abraham," Abimelech roared, "what harm I have ever done to you to deserve such shabby treatment from you? You should never have done this to us. What on earth were you thinking of?"

"Well," Abraham replied in his defence, "it was very clear to me that people in this country don't respect God at all so I didn't fancy my chances if they found out I was Sarah's husband. Sarah and I agreed, then, that she'd call me her brother to lessen the danger to me. And besides, I'm not altogether wrong in calling Sarah my sister, because we do, in fact, share the same father."

Abimelech didn't fancy his chances, either, finding himself on the wrong side of God, so he squashed his anger and showered gifts of animals and servants on Abraham instead, telling him to settle down in his land anywhere he wished.

To Sarah he said, "I've given your brother - since you insist on calling him that - a thousand pieces of silver to make up for the trouble you've been through. I hope that settles our account. I'm sorry." In reply, Abraham asked God to heal all the womenfolk in Abimelech's household to allow them to have children again, which God did.

Chapter 9 - Abraham's big challenge....

Sarah knew herself now that she was pregnant. "I can see why God called him Isaac," she said to Abraham, "what a laugh, me breastfeeding a baby at my age!"

True to God's promise a boy was born, and true to his command, Isaac was circumcised on the eighth day and when he finally stopped nursing, Abraham celebrated the day with a huge feast.

Abraham loved his two strapping young boys, but Sarah didn't approve of Ishmael playing with Isaac so she badgered Abraham to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael, once and for all.

It really upset Abraham hearing Sarah go on like this but God told him not to worry.

"I know how you feel about Ishmael," God said, "but he'll be fine. I'll make sure he becomes a great nation, too. So, go ahead and do as your wife wishes, and besides, as you already know, it's through Isaac's family, not Ishmael's, that my promise to you is being fulfilled."

Early next morning, Hagar and Ishmael prepared to leave. Abraham loaded them up with as much food and water as they could carry and watched with great sadness as they shuffled off into the desert.

Under the heat of the blazing sun, their water soon ran out, leaving Hagar in a desperate state. The heat of the desert was burning them to a crisp so she pushed Ishmael as far into a bush as she could to give him as much shade as possible, but he was so scared his mother was leaving him he couldn't stop crying.

She walked some distance away, sat in the sand and bawled. "My poor, dear Ishmael," she wailed, "am I going to have to watch you die before my very eyes?"

But as her tears soaked the sand she heard a voice saying, "Hagar, Hagar, it's all right, God heard Ishmael crying, so go back to that boy of yours and hug him 'til his tears stop. God won't let him die - how can he when he's going to make a great nation of Ishmael too, one day?"

Cheered up immensely, Hagar rushed back to her son, hugged and rocked him and buried her face in his hair. When she finally looked up she could hardly believe her eyes, for there in front of her was a well full of water! She quickly filled her water-skin and trembling with joy she knelt by her son to help him drink, all the while stroking his hair and telling him again and again how much she loved him. Ishmael not only survived the ordeal, he grew up under God's watchful care into a strong and healthy boy, becoming a real hotshot with a bow and arrow.

Meanwhile, King Abimelech and Phicol, his army chief, had arranged a special meeting with Abraham. "We know God is with you in everything you do," the king started, "so we hold you in great respect. Because of that respect I have always stuck to my promise to let you live in peace here. Would you now promise me in return, in God's name, that you will live in peace with me and my family down through the ages too?"

"Well, of course I promise," Abraham replied, "You have my word, and since we're on the subject of asking favours, I have one for you, too. Actually, it's more in the way of a complaint because I found out recently that some of your men seized one of my wells."

"They did?" Abimelech replied, sounding startled, "I had no idea this was going on. You do believe me, don't you?"

"Let's make a pact, you and me, right here and now," Abraham replied. "I dug this well, it's mine, but I'll offer you seven lambs if you agree it's mine. Those are my terms. Do you accept them?"

"Yes, I do," Abimelech said, with great relief, so the deal was settled, they made a pact and called the spot Beersheba, which means "we made a pact by the well." Things settled down so nicely after the agreement at Beersheba that Abraham and his family settled there for good.

But God then gave Abraham the biggest challenge of his life.

“Abraham,” he said, “I want you to take Isaac, that son you love so very much, to the land of Moriah. When you get there, I’ll show you a hill there that has a place of worship on top of it and at that worship spot I want you to offer your son as a sacrifice.”

Abraham could hardly believe his ears. Did he just hear God tell him to kill Isaac? How could that be?

On the other hand, hadn't God promised Abraham he would have descendants through Isaac? God was God and God had promised, so early next morning Abraham saddled up his donkey and with Isaac and two other men in tow they struck out on the three day journey to Moriah. On the way they split firewood for the sacrifice and on the third day Abraham spied the place of worship on the top of a nearby hill. “Ah, there it is,” he said, “can I ask you two men to wait here with the donkey while Isaac and I head up that hill to express our thanks to God? We won’t be long.”

Abraham loaded the firewood they'd split on Isaac's shoulders while he carried the fire-making tools and the sacrificial knife.

It was while they were climbing their way slowly and quietly up the hill that Isaac broke the silence between them. “Dad,” he said. “Yes, my boy, what’s on your mind?” “Dad, we’re going to do a sacrifice when we get to the top, right? Well, we’ve got everything to make a sacrifice with, like the fire-making tools and the wood but what about the lamb? We haven't brought an animal to sacrifice and where are we going to find a lamb round here?”

“Don’t worry about that, son,” Abraham replied gently, “God will provide himself a sheep for a sacrifice, just you wait and see.”

So they plodded on in silence ‘til they reached the top, where Abraham built an altar of rocks and arranged the wood on the rocks for burning the sacrifice. He told Isaac to put his arms behind his back and Abraham bound the boy's wrists together, and then his ankles. After checking the knots, Abraham hoisted Isaac off the ground and laid him down on the altar on top of the wood. He reached for the sacrificial knife with its razor-sharp blade and placed it against Isaac's throat to slit it in one smooth movement as he would have done to a sheep.

It was at that dreadful moment when Abraham had committed himself to killing Isaac that a voice yelled out, “Stop, Abraham, stop right there, don’t you go one step further. There’s no need to harm the boy because now I know for certain you are willing to do anything I tell you, even sacrifice your own son, if that’s what it takes.”

Abraham slowly withdrew the knife and leant against the altar for a moment to let his emotions settle. He gently lifted Isaac off the altar, loosened the knots, took off the ropes and hugged the boy for a long time. As they turned to leave, Abraham spotted a ram caught by its horns in a nearby thicket. “See?” he cried to Isaac, “didn’t I say God would provide himself a sacrifice? Come on, let’s catch it before it gets away.” Abraham named the spot “God always provides.”

The angel then spoke to Abraham a second time, saying, “You’ve done well, dear Abraham. God now swears by himself he’ll hold nothing back from you that he promised you, because you held nothing back from him, even your only son. Every nation on earth will now wish they could be blessed like you, because you trusted God and did what he said.” Trust had won through, but it was still a rather shaky father and son who gathered their bits and pieces together, scrambled down the hill, greeted the two men waiting at the bottom and headed for home.

Chapter 10 - A wife for Isaac...

At the rather young age for people back then, Sarah died at 127 years old, a very sad time for Abraham. Since he was still a foreigner in that country, he begged the Hittites in that region for a plot of land where he could bury all those who died in his family.

The Hittites were more than willing to give him land. "You, Abraham, are a mighty prince, so please, bury your dead in the best burial spot you can find in our country. There isn't one person among us who would deny you that, because we all hold you in very high esteem."

"Thank you for your kindness," Abraham replied, "I wonder then if I could ask of you a very special favour. I would very much like the cave that belongs to Ephron at Machpelah, but I'd like you all to be there to witness my paying full price for it."

Ephron, however, would have none of it. "Absolutely not," he cried, which was followed by an audible gasp from the audience. "I would never sell you my cave, because I want to give it to you and all the land around it too!"

The crowd smiled with relief. Abraham though, was deeply moved. "That is a very generous offer," he said, "but I insist on paying, so, please, let me pay the price."

Ephron thought for a minute and said, "Well what's four hundred shekels of silver between the likes of you and me? Yes, it's all yours for four hundred." So they weighed out the silver and closed the bargain. It was here, then, that Abraham buried Sarah, in that beautiful plot of land surrounded by so many lovely trees.

Abraham was a very old man himself by now, with a lifetime of being hugely blessed by God to look back on. There was still one thing he was very much concerned about, though. He wanted Isaac married to the right wife, so he took aside the man who had served him the longest, who now managed everything Abraham owned, and earnestly bent his ear.

"I want you, my trusty manager, to absolutely promise me, and by the great God of heaven and earth too, that you won't go looking for a wife for my son from around here. I'd like Isaac to marry a girl from back home in my home country and from my own family."

"Well, that's a bit of a tall order," the manager replied, "What if I find such a woman, but she refuses to come all the way back here? Wouldn't it be a whole lot easier to take Isaac over there himself and let him find her?"

"No," Abraham replied, "don't ever take Isaac back there, because God took us out of there as a family to give us this land instead, so I'd rather you went there yourself and found her. Besides, God will send an angel ahead of you to find the right woman and he'll let you know who she is. If she's the right one, she'll come back with you. But if she refuses to come with you, then I no longer bind you to your promise. Whatever happens, just please don't take my son back there, agreed?"

With everything agreed between them, the manager picked a few men to travel with him and between them they loaded up ten camels, packed with gifts from Abraham for Isaac's wife-to-be and her family, and off they headed to Abraham's homeland. He aimed straight for the town where Abraham's brother Nahor lived and camped there to rest up and see what the women were like there first.

The town's well was just outside of town and in the evening the women would be filling up their water supply for the following day, so he parked his camels by the well and waited. He also prayed. "Great God of my dear master Abraham, would you please give me good fortune and make things work out today as you always have for Abraham? I believe you will, so here's my plan. I've placed myself in the best spot I can think of, right by the well where all the womenfolk

draw water. This evening, I'm going to ask the first lady who arrives at the well if she'll let me have a drink out of her water jar. If she says, 'drink up, kind sir, and let me take water to your camels too,' I'll take that as the sign from you she's just the woman for Isaac!"

He was about to pray a few more thoughts to God when he saw a lady approaching the well already, with her water jar on her shoulder.

He ended his prayer quickly, rose to his feet and watched the woman carefully.

Wow, was she ever a beauty!

She also happened to be Abraham's brother's granddaughter, Rebecca, a hometown girl right from Abraham's family! She was perfect and she wasn't married either, and never had been. None of this did the manager know yet, of course, and besides, his main concern right at that moment was, would God go along with his plan?

There was only way to find out, but he'd better get moving because she'd already filled her jar and was about to head back to town, so he hurried over to meet her and as they met he asked her, "Excuse me, but could I possibly have a drink of water from your jar, please?"

"Of course," she smiled, "drink up, kind sir," and she lowered the jar to let him drink.

So far so good, he thought, but would she offer to take water to his camels too?

He nearly choked when she pointed to his camels and asked him, "Are those your camels over there?" He nodded, too excited to speak. "Then I shall draw enough water for them, too," she said and without more ado she emptied the rest of her jar into the animals' water trough, hurried back to the well to refill her jar, emptied it into the trough again and she kept filling the trough until all the camels were satisfied.

He watched her as though he was in a dream. This was amazing, the first girl to turn up and she'd followed his plan exactly!

As she was filling her jar to take it back home with her, he quickly unstrapped one of the saddlebags, took out a gold ring and two gold bracelets from among Abraham's gifts, hurried over to the girl and gave them to her. "These are for you," he said, "In return, could you tell me whose daughter you are and would your father by any chance have enough room at home for my men and I and the camels, to stay there for the night?"

She recovered herself enough to say, "Why of course, there's plenty of room at home for both you and the camels. And in answer to your other question as to whose daughter I am, I'm Nahor's granddaughter."

Nahor's granddaughter?! Abraham's brother's granddaughter?! On hearing that, the man simply buckled at the knees and crumpled to the ground in a heap at her feet. She could hear him crying, "Thank you, thank you great God, you've been so faithful to Abraham yet again. You brought me right here to his brother's home and look what a granddaughter he's got!"

The girl was so surprised, she dropped her jar and ran. She burst through the door at home, shouting between breaths, "You won't believe what just happened. There's a man out there by the well, who's all excited about God helping him find us! What are we going to do?"

Laban, Rebecca's brother, tried to calm her down, but then he noticed the gold ring and bracelets. He could see they were extremely valuable. "Rebecca," he said, "tell us again, slowly this time, everything the man said, and don't miss a word." He listened intently and when she finished he cried, "Follow me," and he rushed out of the house, straight to where the man was standing by his camels.

"Please excuse our Rebecca," Laban said, introducing himself between puffs, "she doesn't quite know what to make of all this. You're welcome to stay with us, so come on back to our house, there's certainly no reason for camping out here anymore."

When the manager and his men arrived at the house, everything had already been prepared, water to wash their feet and food and bedding for the camels. When offered food, though, the manager refused it. "I'm sorry," he said, "I can't eat a thing until you hear everything I have to tell you. It's just amazing."

"Well, let's be hearing it, then," Laban said.

"I'd better start off by telling you who I am. I work for Abraham, yes, Nahor's brother Abraham. You'll be happy to know God has made Abraham very rich and he has a son, born to Sarah when she was ninety years old! Not only was that son wonderful news for both of them, that son is also the reason why I'm here now. You see, Abraham made me promise not to find a wife for his son from anywhere round that part of the country. He wanted me to come here, to his hometown and to his family to find a wife for him. I told him I didn't think a woman would be willing to travel all the way back there to his son, but Abraham told me an angel would make my journey successful. So when I got here I told God my plan of action and if it worked, then I'd know God was with me."

He told the story of what happened. When he came to the end he said, "Well, that's it. Now tell me, are you willing to go along with Abraham's hopes and dreams, or should I be looking elsewhere?"

There was a long pause, as they all looked at Rebecca and at each other, and then Laban spoke up, "No, you don't have to go looking anywhere else, it's clear to us all that Rebecca is God's choice for Abraham's son, so it's fine if she goes with you."

The manager was so overjoyed at their answer he fell on the ground again and thanked God right there and then. He and his men then rushed out to the camels and brought back all Abraham's gifts for them. "Now we can eat!" the manager cried, "This couldn't have worked out better!"

Next morning he wanted to leave as quickly as possible but Rebecca's family wanted her to stay a few more days. It was her choice, though, so they called her in to ask her what she wanted to do. She was all for leaving right away, she couldn't wait to meet the man that God himself had chosen her to marry!

At the other end, Isaac wasn't in waiting mood either, he'd already moved to a town closer along the route where Rebecca would be coming. Every day he headed for open country hoping to catch sight of her and then one evening, far off in the distance, he saw the camels approaching.

He started walking toward them and it wasn't long before Rebecca caught sight of him. She slid out of the saddle, ran up to the manager, shouting to him excitedly, "Who is that man walking towards us? Is it him?"

"Let's see," the manager said, squinting his eyes in Isaac's direction, "Yes, it looks like - yes, yes it is, it's my good master Isaac. Isn't that just wonderful?!" The two men ran toward each other, greeted each other in a huge hug, while the manager gasped out the whole story of what had happened.

Isaac listened to every word, glancing often in Rebecca's direction, but she had covered her face with her veil, so he couldn't see her smiling. Her eyes were just glistening though, and by the time the story ended, Isaac was left with no doubt in his mind that God had chosen Rebecca just for him, so he walked up to her, with the biggest, sheepiest grin on his face, took her hand, fell deeply in love with her on the spot and invited her home to be his wife. She couldn't have been more perfect! It was truly a marriage made in heaven.

Chapter 11 - Rebecca's babies....

After Sarah's death, Abraham remarried and had many more children with his second wife Keturah. He lived to the ripe old age of 175 and was buried beside Sarah in the cave he'd bought from Ephron. Both his sons, Isaac and Ishmael, were present at the funeral. Ishmael went on to have twelve sons of his own, all of them princes just as God had promised Hagar they would be. But no children at all yet for Isaac, because Rebecca, just like Sarah, couldn't have children either, so Isaac begged God to heal her. And God answered, too - with twins!

But what a battle those two twins had with each other inside Rebecca. They were hardly ever at rest and the thumping around in her uterus got worse and worse.

"I thought pregnancy was supposed to be a wonderful time," she said to Isaac after a really bad spell of the babies bashing each other, "so how come it's not like that for me? Look at these two go at each other," she moaned, pointing to the lumps appearing and disappearing on her bulging abdomen.

She finally went to God to ask him what was going on.

"Ah," God said, "I'm glad you asked, because there's something you need to know about those two babies of yours, Rebecca. They're going to be very different from each other. They'll head off in opposite directions all through their childhood and the nations they produce later will each go its own way too, but the stronger of the two, the younger brother, will win out eventually, and his older brother will end up serving him."

This wasn't the most comforting news for Rebecca but it did at least explain why those two were fighting already, even before they were born.

She wondered what giving birth to these two rambunctious babies would be like and not surprisingly she was in for a shock, two shocks actually. The first shock came when the first baby appeared. He looked like he was wearing a goatskin coat! His skin was a deep red colour and he was covered with hair. He felt all rough, so they named him Esau, which meant just that, 'rough.'

The second shock was right on the heels of the first one, literally, because hanging onto Esau's heel was this little hand! While Esau had been slithering down Rebecca's birth canal, his twin brother had grabbed onto his heel and come slithering out after him! So they named him Jacob, which meant 'heel snatcher.'

And just as God said, the two boys were very different. Esau was the rugged outdoors type and really looked the part with his ruddy complexion and hairy chest. He loved nothing better than a night out under the stars or tracking down animals through the rough country.

He soon became a skilful hunter. He was his father's favourite too, because Isaac just loved the steaks Esau kept bringing home from his hunting trips. Jacob, in total contrast, was a quiet boy, a homebody. He loved nothing better than a night in the kitchen with his mother, cooking up something delicious. He soon became a skilful cook, so he naturally became Rebecca's pride and joy, and he was great company for her at home.

One day, while Jacob was preparing an especially delicious red lentil soup, Esau came staggering into the kitchen and nearly dropped dead on the floor. He looked terrible. He'd been out for several days slogging it through rough country in the foulest weather and it had taken all his skill and strength to find his way home alive.

"Jacob," he gasped, spying the steam rising from the saucepan, "how about a bucketful of that stuff you've got simmering away there for your starving old brother, before I waste away into nothing, eh?"

“So,” Jacob chuckled, “the mighty hunter has returned home, has he? You don’t look so tough now, though, do you? The way you look, big brother, I don’t think you’ve even got strength enough to feed yourself. But you’re not getting any of this soup until you give me what’s yours. I’ll trade you my soup for your rights as the firstborn son.”

It was a mean trick because if Esau agreed to Jacob’s terms, all the privileges Esau had for being the older boy would be handed over to Jacob, effectively making Jacob the older brother instead. On the other hand, this was exactly what God had told Rebecca was going to happen, that the older brother would end up serving his younger brother.

But Esau was in no mood to resist and Jacob knew it.

“What’s the point in me having privileges of any kind,” Esau groaned, “when I’ll be dead in a few seconds if I don’t eat, so yes, take my birthright, but give me food now or I’m a goner.”

“Swear to me you’ll do it,” Jacob demanded cruelly.

“Yes, Jacob, yes,” Esau gasped, “now let me eat.”

With an inward cry of triumph, Jacob quickly spooned the soup into Esau followed by a steaming chunk of freshly baked bread. Esau gobbled it down and with his strength returning he left the kitchen without a word or a worry because the privileges he had as the firstborn son hadn’t meant much to him anyway.

Chapter 12 - Isaac pretends too....

That summer the sun beat down with a vengeance, drying up the land into dust. The crops shrivelled and day after day Esau came home empty and exhausted from his hunting trips.

Isaac was all for lifting tentpegs and heading for Egypt, but God had other plans. “No, Isaac, don’t go down to Egypt, I want you to stay here, because this is the country I promised to your father for being the good man he was, and I’m passing that promise onto you. I’ll bless you now just as I blessed him, so stay here and I’ll look after you.”

So Isaac aimed his camels at King Abimelech country instead, where many years earlier his mother’s beauty had so dazzled the people that his father had thought it safer to pretend Sarah was his sister.

When they saw Rebecca, though, the same thing happened all over again! They were so dazzled by Rebecca’s beauty that it was Isaac who panicked this time, thinking they’d also kill him if he told them Rebecca was his wife. So he too pretended Rebecca was his sister.

For quite a while, Isaac stayed out of danger telling everyone Rebecca was his sister but one day King Abimelech happened to look down from his palace window to the garden below and saw Isaac and Rebecca with their arms round each other kissing and hugging.

“Oh no, not again,” Abimelech spluttered, “that man Isaac is as bad as his father. Rebecca isn’t Isaac’s sister, she’s his wife,” and he yelled for someone to get down to where Isaac and Rebecca were giggling away and haul Isaac up to the king’s room immediately.

When Isaac arrived a few moments later, Abimelech didn’t even let him catch his breath, he launched straight into him.

“So, Isaac, Rebecca is your sister is she? Don’t you realize what God might have done to us if someone had actually gone ahead and married Rebecca?”

“I know,” Isaac replied, red with embarrassment, “I’m really very sorry, but I panicked. I thought I’d be killed if people here thought Rebecca was my wife.”

“Well, you've got no reason to panic from now on Isaac,” Abimelech yelled, his anger calming only slightly, “because I’m going to let the whole nation know that if anyone even as much as touches Rebecca, or even touches you for that matter, they are the ones who’ll be killed.” And with that said, Abimelech stormed out of the room yelling orders in all directions, while Isaac stood there in the room alone feeling terrible.

Despite this lapse on Isaac's part, God blessed him immensely. Isaac, for instance, would sow just one seed in the ground but up would pop a hundred plants from it. Such an amazing rate of growth soon made Isaac a very rich man.

But that made the Philistines in that part of the country insanely jealous so they took to slinking round Isaac’s land at night and filling up his water wells with earth. As fast as they filled them, Isaac had them cleaned out again, but this couldn’t go on much longer before emotions on both sides spilled over the boiling point.

Before things got really ugly, King Abimelech himself stepped in, but rather than try to sort out the difficulty by getting everybody to work things out together, he decided Isaac was the problem.

“Isaac,” he said, “I want you to leave this part of my country and go live somewhere else. You’ve become so rich and powerful that my people cannot cope with it. They’re scared and they’re jealous and all they can think of while you’re here is to make life as miserable as they can for you, so I suggest for your sake, and for theirs, that you leave here as soon as possible.”

Isaac dutifully did as the king suggested and left.

He soon found a very nice spot in a valley with lots of fresh running water for the animals. But they soon got into trouble again, this time with the local shepherds who claimed the water was all theirs.

So Isaac moved again and just as his men were digging another well, the local shepherds turned up in a froth yet again. For a third time they moved and at last found a spot where no one complained, so Isaac called the place ‘Rehoboth,’ meaning something like “room to move,” since they could now move about freely without furious shepherds telling them off.

Chapter 13 - Esau is tricked again....

A little while later Isaac took a trip back to Abraham's old home in Beersheba. That night, God told Isaac he wasn’t to be afraid of anybody or anything because God was with him now, just as he’d been with his father.

It was a well timed boost of encouragement because soon after this happened King Abimelech turned up with some powerful friends.

Isaac wasn’t the least bit intimidated. “So, why are you here?” he challenged them quite openly, “It can't be for any friendly purpose because it wasn't long ago you threw us out and you weren’t exactly polite about it either, so tell me what you’re here for and be quick about it.”

Abimelech was no fool. He knew he was in deep trouble crossing swords with Isaac, so he tried the same approach with Isaac that he’d taken with Abraham.

“Please hear us out, Isaac,” the wily old king replied, “We can see God’s with you so we’d like to make a pact with you. Frankly, we thought we asked you to leave us very peaceably because none of you were harmed in any way, were you? And now look at you, nobody’s upset at you living here and God is obviously blessing you, so how about making a pact with us that you won’t harm us, just like we didn’t harm you. Agreed?”

Isaac couldn't help smiling. Abimelech was a cunning old codger, but pretty harmless really. "Yes, I agree," Isaac replied, "and let's celebrate our agreement with a feast, as well."

It was a wonderful evening and next morning Abimelech and his powerful friends returned home, very much relieved at how well things had gone.

Esau, meanwhile, had deeply upset both his parents by marrying a Hittite girl called Judith, but that didn't stop Isaac in his old age wanting to pass on a special blessing to his oldest son.

Isaac was nearly blind by this time but he still enjoyed a good steak so he called Esau in and said, "Esau, my boy, how about taking that bow and arrow of yours and see if you can shoot down a nice piece of venison for me, and do it up just how I like it, because I'd like to give you a blessing before I die."

Rebecca was wondering what Isaac had called Esau in for, so she'd listened in and heard every word. She waited until Esau was out of sight on his quest for a nice steak, then she hurried off to find Jacob.

"Jacob," she said, grabbing his arm, "I just overheard a conversation between your Dad and Esau. Dad's planning to pass on his blessing just as soon as Esau gets back with a steak dinner for him. We've got no time to lose. Go out to the goats right now and pick out a couple of really nice young ones, bring them back to me and I'll cook up a dish your Dad just loves, and you can take it into him pretending you're Esau."

"But I'll never get away with it," Jacob whispered frantically, "Esau is all hairy and what if Dad touches my arm or something? My skin is way too smooth, so he'll know right away it's not me and then he'll curse me, not bless me."

"Don't argue with me, Jacob," Sarah whispered back, "just do as I say and I'll take the rap if anything goes wrong."

Rebecca cooked up a delicious goatmeat stew and then wrapped the leftover goatskins round Jacob's hands, arms and neck, got him to dress in Esau's best clothes and sent him into Isaac.

She knew Isaac was so blind he couldn't tell which boy was which, so it didn't surprise her when he asked Jacob, "Now which of you two boys is the kind one bringing me such a lovely smelling meal?"

"I'm Esau," Jacob lied, "I've brought you that juicy steak you were after, and just how you like it, too."

"You have? Already? That was quick," Isaac said.

"Oh, that's because God had a deer close by," Jacob lied for the second time. Actually, he was lying rather well, he thought to himself, but Isaac wasn't entirely convinced.

"Come closer to me, my boy, so I can feel your skin," he said, so Jacob knelt down beside him and stretched out his arm. "Now isn't that the strangest thing?" Isaac said to himself, "the voice is definitely Jacob's but his hands feel just like Esau's." "Are you really Esau?" he asked.

"Yes I am," Jacob lied again.

"Oh well, let's be having that steak then," Isaac said, smacking his lips together, "and how about a spot of wine to wash it down with, too?"

Isaac still had one trick left up his sleeve, though. "Come here, son, and give me a kiss," so Jacob leant over to kiss him, which gave Isaac the chance to take a quick sniff at the boy's clothes. They had that outdoorsy smell of Esau all right and the boy's hands were all hairy like Esau's, too. It had to be Esau, so Isaac went ahead with his blessing.

"May God heap the riches of the earth upon you," he said, laying his hands on Jacob's head, "and supply you with all the food and wine you'll ever need. He'll make you into such a great

ruling nation that many nations, including those of your brothers, will bow down to you and serve you. May he curse those who curse you and bless those who bless you.”

Jacob could hardly believe his ears. Riches and power, what more could a man want? He quickly thanked his father and ran from the room to tell his mother.

Only minutes later, Esau arrived with a freshly killed deer on his shoulders! He had no idea what Jacob had done so he merrily went about preparing a meal for his Dad as well, and took it into him.

“Come on, eat up Dad,” he cried, “and then give me your blessing.”

“Eh?” Isaac replied, with considerable surprise, “Who are you?”

“Who am I? I’m Esau of course, your eldest son.”

“Esau?” Isaac spluttered with growing agitation, “then who was it who brought me that steak dinner earlier? Oh, Esau,” Isaac moaned, as the awful truth dawned on him, “it was Jacob, all dressed up and smelling just like you. He even felt hairy like you too, because I touched him to find out. And to think I gave that boy my blessing and I can’t take it back, either.”

“That little swindler,” Esau yelled, throwing the food aside with a crash, “that’s the second time that mangy little creep has cheated me. First he weasled the privileges of the firstborn out of me with that soup trick, now he’s got my blessing, too. He wasn’t named the little ‘snatcher’ for nothing, was he? But he didn’t get all your blessing, did he? You must’ve kept something back in your blessing for me too, right?” Esau pleaded.

“Not a thing, I’m afraid, son,” Isaac replied, “I gave Jacob everything. I promised him all the food and wine he’d ever need. I even promised him that one day you and your brothers would end up bowing down to him, too. What’s done is done, but if there’s anything else I can do for you, let me know.”

By now Esau was sobbing and trembling with rage but suddenly, through the tears, his eyes lit up with hope and he rushed over to Isaac.

Grabbing his Dad’s hands in his, he cried, “Yes, Dad there is something you can do for me. The blessing you gave Jacob, that wasn’t the only blessing you could give, was it? There must be other blessings you can give, so please Dad, is there a blessing you can give me?”

Isaac thought for a minute and then reached for the shaggy head that was now buried in his lap. “Riches and power will not come easily to you, my son. By the blade of your sword you will live. You will serve your brother but the day will come when you will be strong enough to shake him off your back for good.”

“So,” Esau, thought to himself angrily, “I’m going to have to fight for everything I own, am I, while that little weasel Jacob gets things easy, when by rights it should’ve been the other way round. But what if the little weasel was dead?” he thought, brightening up, “Now that would change things a bit, wouldn’t it? No weasel, no blessing. Dear old Dad’s not going to live for ever either, is he, so I’ll just wait ‘til Dad dies and then check out how sharp the blade of my sword is on my brother. You just wait, my slimy little brother,” he yelled, his voice rising, “one day I will have my revenge and I will kill you,” and he yelled so loudly that someone passing by heard him and rushed off to let Rebecca know.

“Jacob, Jacob,” Rebecca shouted at the entrance to her son’s tent, “I just heard Esau is threatening to kill you so you’ve got to get out of here right now. Now listen to me. You can hide out at my brother Laban’s place in Harran and stay there until Esau cools down. I know what Esau’s like, he’ll calm down and forget this even happened, so I’ll send word to you as soon as it’s safe to come back. You must run, Jacob, because I can’t stand the thought of losing you.”

She didn't want him to lose him because he might leave home and marry another awful Hittite woman like the one Esau had married so she rushed off to find Isaac and, tugging urgently at his sleeve, she cried, "Isaac, you've got to talk to Jacob before he leaves because I don't want to live another day if I find out he married one of those horrible Hittite women."

Isaac sighed. Rebecca really was a challenge at times, but he was going to talk to Jacob anyway before he left, so he called him in.

"Jacob, despite this latest escapade of yours, I want you to know you still have my blessing. But, dear lad, can you do something right for a change, like marry one of Laban's daughters, because Mother is threatening to do herself in if you go off and marry a Hittite girl like Esau did. She wants you to marry a nice girl in the family, and, frankly, so do I. But much more important to remember, son, is the promise God gave to your Grandpa Abraham. That promise was passed on to me when he died and it now passes on to you when I die. So, may God now bless you and make of you a great many nations and give this land to your descendants. Well, you'd better be off before Esau turns up and may the great merciful God be with you as he has been with me."

Chapter 14 - Jacob and Rachel...

When the news reached Esau that his Dad had still blessed Jacob anyway, and packed him off to Paddan-aram to find a wife from the family because he didn't want Jacob marrying any Hittite girl, Esau realised he hadn't exactly been the easiest son to get along with, either. It might smooth things over with his parents, he thought, if he married a girl from the family, too, so, even though he had several wives already, he went to his Uncle Ishmael, who still had an unmarried daughter, and he married her.

Jacob, meanwhile, was well on his way to his Uncle Laban. By sundown he'd reached a place of worship, an altar of rocks like the one Abraham was going to sacrifice Isaac on. It was a warm night so he chose a rock from the pile shaped like a pillow, placed a blanket over the rock, rested his head on it and soon fell asleep.

That night he had a vivid dream. In the dream he saw a huge ladder reaching high up into the clouds and angels were stepping up and down it.

Then God was standing beside him saying, "I am the God of your Grandpa Abraham and of your father Isaac. This land on which you are sleeping, all of it round here, I'm giving to your descendants. It's all going to be theirs one day, and they'll need every bit of it because they'll fill it as far as your eye can see in every direction. I'll bless them so much, everyone will wish they could be blessed like them. And now, Jacob, I'll be with you wherever you go, and one day I'll bring you back to this land. I won't leave you 'til everything I promised you is done, every word of it. You just remember that."

When Jacob woke up, the dream was so vivid in his mind he stood up and said aloud, "I had no idea God was in this place when I got here. This has to be the spot where God actually lives and where he and the angels go back and forth from earth to heaven." And to think he'd been sleeping there all that night!

It was a very special place so he picked up the rock he'd used as a pillow, poured some of the oil he was carrying over it, placed it on top of a pile of rocks in the shape of a pillar and called the place Bethel, the 'house of God,' or the 'place where God lives.'

He then stood beside the pillar and said aloud to God, "If you look after me as you said you would in my dream and you bring me back here just as you promised, then I promise you in

return I'll come back up here to this very spot, to this place where you live, and I will give you a tenth of everything you bless me with."

Several hot days of travel later, Jacob arrived by a large well with a huge rock lid that rolled to the side when the shepherds drew water for their sheep each evening. There were three flocks of sheep already lying close to the well, guarded by several shepherds.

Jacob asked them where they were from.

To his surprise and delight, they were from Harran, the very town where his Uncle Laban lived.

"You wouldn't by any chance know Laban, would you?" Jacob asked the shepherds.

"Laban? Yes we know him well," one of them replied.

"That's wonderful!" Jacob said, "Is he in good health?"

"He's doing just fine, he and all his family, but you can find out for yourself if you like because here comes his daughter Rachel with their sheep, right now."

"But isn't it a bit early to be gathering the sheep for the night already?" Jacob asked, "It's still broad daylight. Why not just water them now and let them graze 'til this evening?"

"That's not how we do things round here," one of the shepherds replied, "We wait until all the flocks are here together, then we roll the stone lid away, water the sheep all at once and roll the lid back again."

"Is that so?" Jacob replied, "we'll see about that," and he rolled back the rock lid on the well all by himself and took water to Rachel's sheep.

It was only after he'd rolled the lid back, that he realised how incredible this all was. Here was Rachel, his very own cousin, standing there in the heat haze in all her beauty, by a well in the middle of a sheep pasture! It was all so utterly overwhelming, he started crying and with tears streaming down his cheeks, he walked across to Rachel and kissed her.

"Don't be alarmed, Rachel, I know who you are," he said, "but wait 'til you hear who I am. Believe it or not, I'm your cousin, I'm your Dad's sister's son."

Her eyes registered the shock by opening up nearly as wide as the well opening and then, without saying a word, she spun on her heels and ran back to tell Laban, just like her mother had done many years before her!

When Laban heard the news, this time from his daughter not his sister, he ran out of the house, just as he had done on hearing Rebecca's news, ran all the way out to the well where Jacob was resting and threw his arms round him in a huge hug.

"Is it really true?" Laban cried, "that you're my very own sister's son?"

"Yes, I am," Jacob replied, "Isaac and Rebecca are my parents."

"Oh, that's just wonderful," Laban said, "Right, you're coming back with us and I hope you'll stay with us for a while and make yourself at home."

Which is exactly what Jacob did and proved himself so helpful with the care of Laban's animals, that Laban offered to pay him. "The way you work, Jacob, I can't let you keep working for me for nothing. Go on, tell me now much you think I should pay you and it's yours, and I won't quibble."

"Well," Jacob smiled, knowing for the last month he'd thought of nothing else but the loveliness of Rachel, "you have two daughters and you've probably noticed I've fallen helplessly in love with your youngest, Rachel. She is so lovely to me that I'm ready to work seven years for you, just for her."

Laban laughed heartily on hearing that, "Splendid deal, Jacob, and to be honest I'd rather give her to you than to anyone else anyway, so you'll stay with me for seven years? Yes? That's just perfect!"

The seven years went by like seven days for Jacob, he loved Rachel so much.

When the seven years were up, he went to Laban. "Uncle," he said, "I've done my seven years work for you, so I'm here for my wages!"

"Of course," Laban replied, "my daughter is yours. You've worked hard for her, my boy, so let's have a huge feast and invite everybody; what do you say?"

And what a feast it was. It lasted seven days, but on the evening of the first day it was always a tradition for the father to walk his daughter to her husband's tent for the wedding night. Her face would be covered by a veil, and it was dark by this time too, so Jacob didn't notice that Laban had pulled a trick on him and brought his older daughter, Leah, to his tent, not Rachel.

Next morning, when Jacob woke up, there was Leah lying next to him! He leapt out of bed like a scared rabbit, almost fell over trying to put his clothes on, and rushed out of the tent to go find Laban.

"What a dirty trick that was," Jacob fumed when he finally found him, "you knew very well it was Rachel I worked all that time for, so how come you landed me with Leah instead? I nearly had a heart attack this morning when I woke up."

"Ah, yes, well," Laban replied with a smirk, "we never marry off the younger sister first round these parts, but if you agree to follow all our traditions with Leah over the next seven days of the feast, you can have Rachel too, if, that is, you work another seven years for me."

It was a dirty rotten trick after all those years he'd worked to win Rachel, but it soon dawned on Jacob he was only getting a taste of his own medicine. Hadn't he too played some rotten tricks on Esau?

With a long sigh of resignation, Jacob said, "Alright, Uncle, you win, I'll complete what I must do for Leah and then I'll work another seven more years for you."

"Hey, don't look so miserable," Laban replied cheerfully, "in seven days time Rachel will be yours as well."

Chapter 15 - Leah and Rachel....

Poor Leah, she got terribly left out because Jacob loved Rachel far more than her. But God noticed how unloved the rather plain faced Leah was and how miserable she was each day seeing Jacob drooling about with Rachel, so God made sure Leah got pregnant by Jacob, not Rachel.

Jacob was all eyes for Leah now because he desperately wanted children. Leah realized God had done this on purpose to make sure Jacob would love her, too. It wasn't long before she had four strapping young sons to her name, Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah.

Jealousy now began to eat at Rachel, and she lashed out at Jacob.

"It's all your fault," she pouted, "if you don't give me sons, I'll die, that's what I'll do."

"Oh, and how exactly is it my fault?" Jacob replied rather testily, "can I take the place of God and give you children when he won't? Be reasonable woman."

"All right," Rachel snapped back, "then take my slave-girl, Bilhah, as a wife and I'll adopt any children you have by her as mine, and that way I'll get my family."

So Jacob, just like Grandpa Abraham before him, did as his wife suggested and had a baby by a slave-girl.

Rachel was delighted when Bilhah had a son, believing God had done this just for her. When Bilhah had another son soon after that, Rachel was even more delighted, but more so this time at how clever she'd been in securing two strapping sons of her own, Dan and Naphtali. "That'll show my sister," she gloated. The race for sons was on!

But the score was still four sons to two in favour of Leah.

Suddenly, though, Leah couldn't get pregnant. With Rachel catching up fast, she panicked. Taking a leaf out of Rachel's book, she too offered her slave-girl, Zilpah, to Jacob. Zilpah was quick to oblige by producing two sons in rapid succession, Gad and Asher. That put Leah far out ahead again, with six sons to Rachel's measly two.

It was now Rachel's turn to panic, so when one of Leah's sons turned up with a bag full of plum-like berries called 'love apples,' highly prized for helping women get pregnant, Rachel was the first in line for them. She had to beg them from Leah, though, and naturally Leah wasn't about to part with them.

"So, my dear desperate sister's after my love apples is she?" Leah snarled in triumph, "First you snitch my husband, but that's not enough for you is it, now you want to snitch my love apples, too. Well, you're not getting them, so there."

"Very well," Rachel replied, "since you're in your usual selfish mood, I'll make a trade with you. You give me the love apples and I'll give you Jacob for the night."

The trade suited Leah just fine because she knew God could help her get pregnant far better than any old love apples!

She was right.

The love apples didn't do anything for Rachel, but one night with Jacob and nine months later Leah gave birth to her fifth baby boy, Issachar. Jacob was so delighted that Leah was back in production, that soon after that, Leah had her sixth baby boy, Zebulun.

"Haha," she cried, "God made me worth loving after all! Six lovely sons of my own! Jacob's going to treat me like a princess now!" Jacob must have done just that because the next baby in line was a little princess, their first daughter, Dinah.

Leah was so far ahead of Rachel now, with seven children of her own and two by Zilpah, that Rachel felt just awful.

But that wasn't all she felt. She also felt pregnant!

For the first time in her life, she noticed a little bulge developing in her abdomen and she soon felt the movements of a little body inside her.

"Oh, dear God," she cried, "all those empty years of frustration and humiliation, but you answered my prayer in the end. Thank you ever so much." She was so excited when her baby boy was born that she called him Joseph, which means 'a whole lot,' thinking God might give her a whole lot more sons now!

Chapter 16 - One over Laban....

By now Jacob's family was full to overflowing. He had four wives and twelve children, but for all the happy memories he'd collected in Harran, he was homesick. Home was still back where he'd grown up as a boy. It's no good, he thought, I have to go back, so off to Laban he went to break the news.

"Uncle," he said, "it's time you sent me and this brood of mine back home. You've done well by me but I can't stay here for ever."

He wondered if Laban might have any other tricks up his sleeve, but no, his Uncle was very understanding.

"You're absolutely right, Jacob, it's time you went home and it's also time I admit I'm a rich man because God has blessed you. I owe you a great deal, my boy, so tell me, what can I pay you for all you've done? I'll pay your price, whatever you say."

It was music to Jacob's ears to hear Laban say that because Jacob had a plan that would make him very rich as well, as long as Laban didn't guess what he was up to.

"Well, thank you, Uncle," Jacob said, "yes, I think it's about time I took care of my own family for a change."

"Good," Laban said, "so what can I give you?"

"Nothing," Jacob replied.

"Nothing?" Laban asked, gulping with surprise.

"Absolutely nothing," Jacob said, and then he dropped his next surprise. "What I'd rather do is go through your sheep and goats and pick out all the rejects, like the lambs with black patches on them and the baby goats with white patches on them, and I'll take them as wages, instead. That's fair, isn't it? There aren't that many of them anyway and besides, I can't steal any of your good animals because yours will be the ones that don't have any patches on them. I'll even stay on for a while and keep on looking after your animals just as I always have, if you agree."

Laban could hardly believe his ears. Jacob had already made him rich and now the silly man didn't want to be paid a thing for all those long years of service he'd done. And all he'd asked for was a few animals Laban didn't want anyway! How could he lose on such a deal?

"They're all yours, Jacob," he said - but if Jacob is that stupid, Laban thought to himself, then I might as well make myself even richer at his expense. "I know what I'll do," he said to himself, "Before Jacob even gets a chance to look over my flock, I'll take out all the patchy lambs and goats and give them to my own sons instead."

Trying not to laugh out loud at his sneaky plan, Laban quickly separated out all the patchy goats and lambs and hightailed it over the hills with them. He didn't stop until he'd put a three day journey between him and Jacob. No way would Jacob find them now.

When Jacob sifted through the flock later and discovered all the patchy animals had simply melted into thin air, he was a bit disappointed, but not surprised.

"So, the old codger's still up to his sneaky tricks, is he? Oh well, if that's his game, then it's time for a little breeding trick of my own," Jacob said aloud, and he walked off in search of three types of tree. He soon found what he was looking for: some nice strong stems off an almond tree, a plane tree and a poplar tree. He peeled back the bark on each of the branches so the white of the wood showed.

When he placed the peeled branches in each of the watering troughs where Laban's sheep and goats came to drink, for some strange reason the animals would feel the urge to mate right where those branches were and the babies they produced all came out patchy! Jacob kept these patchy ones for himself, keeping them separate from Laban's animals. This way he began to build up his own flock.

But he went one step better than that. When the females in Laban's flock were in heat and ready to breed, he brought only the strongest ones to the troughs with the branches in so that the strongest babies in the flock became his and Laban was left with all the weaklings!

Laban had no idea this was going on, or how it was happening, but he couldn't help notice that Jacob's flocks were growing in numbers and strength far beyond his own. Laban's sons

spread the word that Jacob was stealing their father dry and gaining all his wealth at their father's expense, which was ironic because that's exactly what Laban had been hoping to do to Jacob!

But the tables had turned and Laban wasn't amused. Jacob felt the air turn icy cold whenever he and his Uncle were together, so it was a welcome relief when God told Jacob it was time to pack up his bags and head for home.

Jacob needed to get Rachel and Leah away from the house to break the news to them, so he asked them both to come out and meet him by the sheep.

"I had to get you out here alone," he said, "because I'm not exactly in your father's best books right now. I've done my best for him, as you well know, but he's constantly cheated me in return. Fortunately, God's been doing the most amazing things to keep us from harm. For instance, whenever your Dad told me the spotted or the striped or the patchy animals were mine, then his entire flock would start producing spotted, striped or patchy babies! That wasn't me who did that, it was God, because he knew what your Dad was doing to me. God even sent me an angel in a dream to tell me what was going on, too. He also told me it was time to get out of here and go back home, so, dear patient wives of mine, what do you think we should do?"

The two women had no doubts at all what they should do.

"We feel terrible about what Dad's been up to as well, Jacob," one of them said, "he even treats us like strangers now too, and think of all the money he could've grabbed from us had it not been for God stopping him. That money belongs to us and our children, so yes, dear husband of ours, you do what God says and we're right behind you all the way."

That's all Jacob needed to hear, to start packing. He waited until Laban was out shearing sheep for the day and then he loaded up the camels, gathered all their cattle, sheep, goats and other assorted animals, and without so much as a 'goodbye' to anyone, they aimed their noses at Canaan, hoping to put as much distance as possible between them and Laban before he found out what they'd done.

Chapter 17 - Jacob and Laban head to head...

They were three days down the trail, over the great river Euphrates already and closing in fast on the hill country of Gilead when Laban got the news he'd been hoodwinked. He was furious. He saddled up immediately, sent out an urgent message to all his relatives for any who could ride with him, and in a cloud of dust a large posse of riders charged out in hot pursuit.

The chase was on!

Jacob's trail was easy to follow with so many hoofprints marking up the sand, but it still took a whole week before Laban caught sight of his quarry, well into the hills of Gilead by now. It was too late in the day for Laban and his men to thunder into Jacob's camp so they set up camp themselves and settled in for the night, knowing they could easily catch Jacob on the morrow.

Laban's eyes glittered brightly in the light of the campfire at the thought of what he would do to that little weasel Jacob when he finally caught up with him. They heavily outnumbered Jacob and his family so they could drag them all back to Harran if they felt like it, or do whatever else they felt like doing to them.

Or so Laban thought, but as he settled down to sleep, eager for the chase next morning, God spoke to him in a dream. "You'd better watch what you say to Jacob tomorrow, Laban. No threats, do you hear?"

That cooled Laban's heels a bit, but he still felt he had the right to let Jacob have a piece of his mind, so off they galloped next morning to close the gap.

As they crested the rise of the last hill, they looked down on Jacob's campsite to see the tents still up. No one down there seemed in any great hurry to get moving which gave Laban and his men plenty of time to set up their own camp out of sight behind the hill. With that done, Laban triumphantly thundered down the hillside, saw the startled Jacob stop in mid-stride between tents and turn to meet him.

"So, Jacob," Laban snorted loudly, skidding to a halt just a few feet short of knocking Jacob over, "can you tell me what got into that woolly-headed mind of yours, dragging off my daughters like they're prisoners of war or something? And why all this sneaking off without telling anyone? You didn't even let me give my daughters and my dear little grandchildren a goodbye kiss. That was most unkind of you. Really, Jacob," Laban said, as he ladled on the guilt even thicker, "if I'd known you were leaving, I would've given you a rousing send-off with all kinds of music and singing to see you happily on your way. But no, you sneak off behind my back like a snake. How could you deceive me like that, Jacob, after all these years we've spent together? Do you realize," Laban glared, pointing back to the hill he'd just galloped down, "that I have enough men over the hill there to do you some real harm, my boy, and in my book you deserve it. So consider yourself very fortunate that your father's God spoke to me personally last night and warned me not to threaten you. I'm going to assume, then, it was simply your desperate longing to hurry back to your home country that got the better of you, but would you please tell me why you had to sneak out like that, and why you stole my gods as well?"

Stole his gods?

That's news to me, Jacob thought, what is the man talking about?

Jacob had no idea, though, that just before they'd hurried out of Laban's house, Rachel had stolen her Dad's favourite little models of the gods he worshipped, because she liked them, too. Not knowing any of this, Jacob ploughed into his reply with total confidence, "Well, to answer your first question, I admit I was sneaky, but it's only because I was scared. I thought you'd force your daughters to stay back with you so that's why I got them out of there without your knowing. As for stealing your gods, I haven't got a clue what you're talking about, but if it's true that someone in our group here stole them, then," Jacob paused, thinking of some suitable punishment, "then," he said rashly, "they ought to die for it. So, let all our relatives here on both sides act as witnesses, that if we have anything in our possession that's yours, then you shall have it back and the culprit dies, all right?"

"Right," Laban said and immediately headed for Jacob's tent to check it out. Meanwhile, Rachel's heart was thumping wildly. If they found those little gods in her tent, she was dead, thanks to her impulsive husband pronouncing a death sentence on the culprit.

But where could she hide them? Laban was already into Leah's tent by now, shuffling through all her stuff, and judging by the clattering and racket going on, it sounded like he wasn't leaving any stone unturned. And her tent was next in line!

"I know what I'll do," she said in a burst of inspiration, "I'll pretend I've got my monthly period and I can't move," so she hid the gods in her camel-bag and sat on it!

Just in time too, as the tent flap was flung aside and in puffed Laban, who started chucking her stuff around, searching through all her bags with a vengeance. He went through everything.

But he didn't ask Rachel to move, out of respect for her condition, and, for some odd reason, he never suspected his daughter could be as sneaky as him! With a final disgusted snort, he stomped out and Rachel nearly fainted with relief.

It didn't matter what Laban did after that because his gods were under Rachel's bottom. As he left the last tent, he was met by a very angry Jacob.

"Are you happy now then?" Jacob yelled. "See? You haven't found one single thing here that belongs to you, have you? Go on, show us what you found. Put it right here in front of us so we can all see it, and let everyone here judge who it belongs to."

Jacob paused, glaring at his Uncle, challenging him to reply.

Laban glared back but said nothing, so Jacob really let loose.

"Hah, just as I thought, you didn't find anything did you? Yet you come stomping out here like I'm some sort of low-life criminal and you ransack our tents like we're all a bunch of common thieves. And all because you think you're so right and I'm so wrong. So now what have you got to say for yourself?"

"Come to think of it," Jacob continued, "what right do you think you've got stomping out here at all, when you know as well as I do that I've never done you wrong? Twenty years you and I have been together and not once in all that time did you lose anything because of me. Remember how you demanded, right from the very beginning, that I pay for any loss amongst your animals while they were in my care, and how I paid up every time? And if any of your animals were stolen by someone, or killed by wild beasts, I covered the loss from my own money. I never ate one steak off your animals, either. For twenty years," Jacob said, pausing wearily as the years of suffering all piled up in one great burst of emotion, "For twenty years I wore myself out for you, working through the heat of the day and the bitter cold of night, constantly losing sleep, to make sure your animals were well cared for. So, tell me, in front of all these witnesses, how many of your animals lost their young?"

He paused, waiting for Laban's reply.

Again, no reply.

"See what I mean?" Jacob cried, "you didn't lose one baby animal in twenty years, did you? That's quite a record, but that's the way it's been these last twenty years, isn't it, and you jolly well know it, too," Jacob said, stabbing his finger in Laban's direction.

"But that's not all I've got to say, and it's time at last that the truth came out. I worked faithfully for you for fourteen years to win your two daughters, and another six years after that to care for your flocks. And what did you do for me in return? You reduced my wages ten times over. Given enough time, if you'd had your way, you would've sent me packing into the desert with nothing. Oh, I knew what you were up to, but my deep respect for my Dad's wishes kept me going, and the God of my Dad and Grandpa has been with me, just as he promised. He saw how hard I was working and how much I was suffering because of you," Jacob shouted, his voice rising again, "and last night you got a dream from him, telling you at last to back off and leave me alone."

They stood there nose to nose, both men breathing hard. For Jacob this release of pent up feelings had been a long time coming, but that didn't stop Laban coming back with his own heated reply.

"I hear what you say, Jacob, but you listen to me too, my boy. Those wives of yours are still my daughters and their children are still my grandchildren, and all these animals you've got filling up the valley here, all came from my flocks in the first place. So, before you get on your high horse blaming me for everything, just you remember, sonny, that everything you own and hold dear came from me. You wouldn't have any of this," Laban shouted, pointing to Jacob's family, all standing there frozen to the spot with their mouths open, "if you hadn't turned up at

my house twenty years ago and I took you in. But here you just whisk them all off without so much as a goodbye. That's why I chased after you, because you hurt me, too."

The tension was terrible as they glared at each other.

And then, suddenly, Laban reached out his hand.

A gasp went up from those who thought he was about to punch Jacob in the nose, but he rested his hand on Jacob's shoulder instead. A smile creased his crinkled, cunning face. "Come on, Jacob," he said gently, "let's you and me make a pact and have all these relatives of ours witness it. What do you say?"

Jacob closed his eyes, his chin dropped to his chest and his shoulders sagged. Twenty years of his life he'd spent being cheated and exploited by Laban, but here he was, on his way home at last, and far, far richer than he'd ever been. Yes, Laban had used and abused him, but he also had a point. Jacob's wives were Laban's daughters; his children were Laban's grandchildren, so leaving for home would cheat Laban of a large chunk of his family, too. Laban was right, there was hurt on both sides now.

No one said a word as Jacob stood there deep in his memories.

With a deep sigh, he opened his eyes, looked round at Rachel and Leah, standing there arm in arm, both smiling at him, and he looked back into the eyes of his Uncle.

There was now a touch of softness and sadness in those eyes now, that melted some of Jacob's pain away. He reached out his hand in return and grasped Laban's arm. "You're right, Uncle, we're still family, so let's make a pact. I'll go find us a large rock pillar and let's all build a cairn of rocks around it as a symbol of our agreement before God, and do you think we could share our last meal together as a family right beside it?"

Laban heartily agreed, adding, "Yes, and let this pillar and cairn be a witness today that you and I made this pact together, so that we never forget we did it."

The cone-shaped cairn was so tall by the time they'd finished it that Laban felt inspired to name it 'The Watchtower,' because, he said, "it will always remind us that God is watching over both of us when we're far away from each other." And then with a glint in his eye, Laban added, "And may it also remind you, Jacob, that God is watching to see you don't mistreat those two daughters of mine, by doing something stupid like marrying other wives as well. God will be watching you, just you remember that!"

And then on a more serious note, looking directly at Jacob, Laban said, "This watchtower will also stand as a reminder to us that I must never walk past it to your side with evil intent and you must never walk past it to my side with evil intent, and may the God of Abraham and his brother Nahor be our judge if we do. Agreed?"

Jacob not only agreed, he had that same deep feeling of awe and respect that his father, Isaac, had, believing God heard all that was being said and done in situations like these, when people make serious agreements and bring God in as witness, so Jacob sacrificed an animal to show God he believed that, too.

Then they all sat down for their final farewell family meal together.

Early next morning Laban gathered his daughters and grandchildren around him, hugged and kissed each one, gave them all his blessing, heaved himself back into the saddle and headed for home.

As Laban and his fellow riders disappeared over the crest of the nearby hill, and with everything resolved so happily between them, Jacob turned to his family with the biggest grin on his face and yelled, "Come on everybody, it's time we headed for our home, too!"

Chapter 18 - Preparing to meet Esau....

As the past evaporated behind them, Jacob could now turn his thoughts to the future.

But that meant Esau! He was going to have to meet Esau somewhere down the line eventually, and there was no telling what Esau might do to him.

Was Esau still angry? Or had the bad memories faded?

While deep into these worries, Jacob happened to look up and there on the trail to meet him were several angels, proving yet again he wasn't alone in these tricky situations. He named the spot 'Mahanaim,' meaning 'two companies,' because he knew in whatever situation he faced, God's great company of angels were right there with him. He and they were like two families walking along side by side, and even though the angels could not always be seen, they were there.

By now it was only a short distance to Edom, the 'red country,' named after the ruddy red Esau himself. So Jacob sent several of his servants ahead with a message for his brother, phrased in such a way he hoped it would soften up his brother a bit, just in case Esau was still out for Jacob's blood. Here's what the message said:

"My dear brother Esau, I've been living with Laban all this time, where I built up sizeable herds and flocks of animals, and I now have many household servants, as well. I'm telling you this because I'd like to win your favour."

Esau would like that, Jacob thought, the hint of all kinds of animals and servants in exchange for a little favour. And if Esau was still sore about being outwitted by Jacob in the past, then this was a trade-off with his slick little brother, where Esau was getting by far the best deal for a change! Esau would love it! Jacob waited confidently for the reply.

When it came, it wasn't at all what he expected.

According to the messengers, they'd met up with Esau, delivered Jacob's message, and Esau had immediately shouted he was on his way with 400 men to intercept them!

"What?" Jacob yelled, scared out of his wits now. They didn't stand a chance if Esau was out for blood. He could destroy them ten times over with that many men.

"But," Jacob thought, his mind racing, "what if we split up into two separate groups? If Esau discovers one of the groups, he might think that's all there is of us and not go hunting for more."

It was all Jacob could think of in the short time before Esau and his army arrived. But he wasn't depending totally on his own clever ideas like he used to, though. Those angels turning up earlier had reminded him that God was always there, right alongside, like a second great company sharing the journey, so it was to God he turned for help, as well.

"Dear God," Jacob said aloud, "the same great God my Grandpa and my Father trusted in so much, it's now my turn to trust you and to do what you want done. You wanted me to come back to my home country because you said it was here you would bless me, but I know me and I know I don't deserve your love at all. Yet, look what you've done for me already. I left this country years ago owning just a walking stick, but now I cross the River Jordan owning enough to fill up two whole camps! I look to you, then, to save me from my brother Esau, because I'm scared he's going to kill us all, the children included. I shouldn't be scared, I know, because you promised my descendants would be just like the sand for numbers one day, so I'm counting on you and your promise for the final outcome."

Meanwhile, Jacob was going to do all he could think of to help the situation, too.

That night he came up with an idea. Esau would be expecting some kind of gift from Jacob in exchange for his favour, so, send Esau the gift as expected, but not all at once. He could soften up Esau bit by bit if he hit him with a steady stream of gifts along the way!

So, Jacob split up the gift into smaller packages. Each package contained just a portion of the 200 nanny goats, ewes and all the other assorted animals he had in mind for Esau, and in charge of each package was one of Jacob's servants, each with a message for Esau when they met him. Esau would bump into them on the trail, ask who they were and to whom the animals belonged, and they would say, "They belong to Jacob. He's sending them as a gift to his brother Esau. And Jacob himself is not that far behind us."

That should stop Esau in his tracks for a while. He'd want to look over the animals and give his nod of approval. He would then get moving again, but only a short time later bump into the second servant and his package of animals, with the same questions asked and the same message given. Only a short way down the trail he'd bump into the third servant coming toward him with yet more animals for him, and then the fourth and so on, in a steady stream of gifts, but always with the same message, "Jacob himself is not that far behind us." By the time Jacob and his brother came face to face, Esau's heart should be nicely softened!

With the servants sent on their way to meet Esau in wave after wave, Jacob thought it best, next, to move Rachel, Leah, Bilhah, Zilpah and all the children to the other side of the River Jabbok, and into the valley beyond, in readiness to meet Esau. They took everything they owned with them, leaving Jacob behind on his own.

Satisfied he'd done as much as he could, Jacob settled down for the night.

Chapter 19 - Jacob's incredible wrestling match....

Jacob had no idea that every move he made was being watched by a stranger very close by. Suddenly, without warning, the stranger came out of the darkness and threw himself at Jacob.

It was only at the last second that Jacob sensed something was coming at him and he tried to dodge. But he was too late. The stranger hit Jacob with a resounding thump and bowled him over, and the two of them fell to the ground, grabbing at each other to gain the best hold.

The fight that followed was a sight to see. They were evenly matched, and both were fit and strong. They wrestled and fought for the rest of that night, until the sun began to rise and shed its dull morning light on two very sweaty, dirty, scratched up figures, still circling each other with grim intent, neither of them weakening and neither giving in.

Then suddenly the hills echoed with a yell from Jacob, as the stranger struck him a crushing blow to the hip, popping Jacob's leg bone right out of the hip socket. Jacob felt the leg give way and the stranger seize the opportunity by throwing Jacob onto his back, knocking the wind out of him.

But Jacob knew a few tricks of his own, and in his desperation they took on added power. He twisted and writhed out of the stranger's grip, flipped him off, and grabbed him round the neck, squeezing for all his worth.

Gasping through the neck lock, the stranger yelled, "Let me go, Jacob, it's daybreak already, we've fought long enough."

"No way," Jacob gasped back, "I'm not letting you go until you offer me some kind of compensation for all I've been through here."

They stayed locked in that position until the stranger gasped out, "What's your name?"

"My name?" Jacob asked, not letting his grip weaken. "My name's Jacob, but what's that to you?"

"Well," the stranger croaked, "it's not Jacob anymore. Your name has been changed to 'Israel,' meaning 'God's fighter,' because you've fought with both God and man and won."

Fought with God? What was the man saying? But Jacob wasn't letting go just yet. He released his grip only a tiny bit to allow the man to talk, and then he asked, "Who are you? What's your name?"

"Why do you need to ask, Jacob?" the stranger replied, "You know who I am." At which point, God blessed Jacob and vanished.

Jacob sat in the dust for a long time, trying to wrap his mind around what had just happened. There was no doubt in his mind who the stranger was. It was the great God himself and here he'd been fighting for hours with God, actually grabbing him, chucking him on the ground and choking him!

"Unbelievable," Jacob said aloud, as the truth sunk home, "I'm calling this place Peniel, the 'Face of God,' because I was literally face to face with God and I'm still alive to tell the tale. It's simply unbelievable," but when he tried to get up, the pain in his hip reminded him that it was believable all right; it had really and truly happened!

Chapter 20 - Esau and Jacob meet at last...

As the sun rose, Jacob hobbled his way over the River Jabbok to join his family and face the music with Esau. But God had called him 'Israel, the Prevailer,' so perhaps he would prevail with Esau too, and there was nothing to be afraid of.

He didn't have to wait long to find out, because he could see Esau and his army of 400 men only a short distance away. Jacob had already arranged his family in a greeting pattern, with Bilhah, Zilpah and their children in front, Leah and her children in a row behind them and Rachel and Joseph at the back. Together, with Jacob walking ahead of them, they went out to meet Esau. This was it!

Jacob bowed low to the ground seven times as the two parties closed in. Esau responded by leaping off his camel and with a great shout of joy he grabbed Jacob in a huge bear hug and they both burst into tears. For Jacob they were tears of relief as well as joy!

On spying all the women and children over Jacob's shoulder, Esau cried out, "And who might all these people be, Jacob?"

"Those, my dear brother, are all the children God has given me over the years. Come children, come and introduce yourselves to your Uncle Esau." So, up they all trooped to Esau with their mothers, all of them bowing low when greeting him.

"And who were all those other people I met along the way?" Esau asked.

"Those were my servants with gifts I hoped would win your favour."

"Win my favour?" Esau roared with delight, "You didn't have to do that, I have more than enough. No, you keep them all for yourself, brother."

"In that case," Jacob replied, "would you accept them as a gift for already having won your favour?"

"Ha!" Esau roared again, "My little brother, still as persuasive as ever! Yes, I accept your gift and thank you. Now let's head back to my place together, and we'll travel at your pace."

"I think it would be better if you went on ahead, Esau," Jacob replied, "I don't want to push my children or the young animals too hard. I'd prefer to take the journey in easy stages if that's all right with you."

"Well, let me send some of my men along with you to help you along the way," Esau said, and so it was that Esau returned on home to Edom, while Jacob and his family made it as far as Shechem, where they bought a piece of land east of town for the price of a hundred sheep.

It was journey's end at last, and in appreciation to God for their safety, Jacob built an altar and called it 'The God of Israel.'

Chapter 21 - Vicious revenge against Shechem....

They were home at last, but their happiness, unfortunately, was short-lived. One of the finest young princes in that area, a fellow called Shechem, became very attached to Jacob's daughter, Dinah, but in trying to win her affections, hoping one day she would become his wife, he pushed her into having sex with him. He regretted it immediately, knowing he should never have done it, but it was too late, a chain of events had begun and in a few days time he would pay for his foolishness with his life.

When Jacob and Shechem's father, Hamor, found out what Shechem had done to Dinah, they got together immediately with Shechem at Jacob's home.

Just as they were getting down to deciding what to do next, the door flew open and in crashed Dinah's brothers in a fury.

"What an intolerable outrage," one of them yelled on seeing Shechem, and was about to grab him by the throat to throttle him, when Hamor yelled out, "No, no please, my son admits he made a horrible mistake but he loves your daughter, and I beg you to let him take her as his wife. We could even use this unfortunate occasion to bring our two families closer, by you marrying our daughters and our sons marrying yours. If you're going to settle down among us for good, then this is how it should be, and besides, this is wide open country with room for all of us to set up homes in."

Shechem himself then stepped forward and in a firm voice said, "Name your price for Dinah and go as high as you like; I'll pay, but please let me marry her."

Jacob's sons exchanged sly looks and excused themselves from the room.

Outside, they quickly hatched a diabolical plan to get rid of Shechem and revenge their sister. They shuffled back into the room and one of them announced in his haughtiest voice, "We've talked this over and decided we cannot let our sister marry a man who hasn't been circumcised. To be uncircumcised in our family is a disgrace. But if Shechem is circumcised we will let Dinah marry him. We also agree to letting our daughters marry your sons so long as all the men in your town are circumcised like we are. On that condition alone we will stay in this area and live as friends and family among you. If you reject our terms, we will move to another place and take Dinah with us."

It was a tall order for newcomers to demand this of the local residents but Shechem was the first to voice his wholehearted agreement. He was a good man, who not only truly and deeply loved Dinah, he was also respected far above anyone else in Hamor's family. He was the cream of the crop and there wasn't anything he wouldn't do for Dinah, even something as painfully sore for an adult man as circumcision.

Hamor and Shechem also agreed to Jacob's sons' proposal, but would the rest of their menfolk agree?

"These people are friendly towards us," Hamor announced, after gathering all the men in town for a meeting, "and their sons need wives just as ours do. Our two families could really benefit from each other, and there's plenty of land for all of us, but they won't live with us as friends and family if our menfolk aren't circumcised like theirs are. If we agree to being circumcised, they promise to share everything they have with us. Those are their terms, so what do you say?"

Amazingly, there wasn't a man who didn't accept the terms, so every last one of them was circumcised.

Three days later they were in excruciating pain, which was exactly what Jacob's sons knew would happen. With every man laid low and too weak to resist, Dinah's two brothers, Simeon and Levi, strode into town and killed the lot of them, including Hamor and Shechem. The other brothers then scoured the town, stepping over the dead bodies, taking anything they wanted. They took the men's wives, children and all their animals, stripped their homes and spread out into the countryside to see what else they could find there, too.

When Jacob found out what they'd done, he was beside himself with fury.

He was also deeply worried.

"Do you realize what you stupid boys have done?" he shouted, hoarse with anger, "My name will now be mud all through this country, and what if all the clans decide to band together and do to us what you just did to Shechem? Did that ever cross your idiotic minds? Did it?"

"Well, what else were we supposed to do?" one of boys snorted in reply, "Just let those rejects treat our sister like a prostitute?" Which was a stupid thing to say because Shechem had loved Dinah, but the boys were in a corner now having to justify their vicious actions, and any old accusation would do.

The news of the boys' murderous exploits soon got around, but before the surrounding towns could put an army together to hunt the boys down, God whisked Jacob and his family out of there, telling Jacob to "Go back to Bethel, the place where you had the dream about the ladder on your first night on the run from Esau, and settle there, instead. And when you get there, build me an altar."

Well, to Jacob, Bethel was the most special place on earth, because that's where God had become real to him for the first time in his life. He gathered his entire family together and told them where they were going and how special it was to him. He told them to wash and dress up in fresh, clean clothes and hand over all their little gods and lucky charms, which he buried under a tree.

Their leaving set off a chain of panic through the neighbouring towns, fearing they might be next on Jacob's hit list, so instead of coming out in force, as Jacob feared, they locked themselves away, giving Jacob and his family a trouble-free journey all the way to Bethel.

Chapter 22 - Rachel dies in childbirth....

The memories, the emotion and the thankfulness Jacob felt as he stood in Bethel on that very same spot he'd stood on so many years ago, were overwhelming. He could never have survived those twenty gruelling years with Laban without the encouragement God had given him right here on that scary, starry night.

He built an altar as God had instructed and soon after finishing it, God spoke to Jacob again. "Remember how you fought with me and demanded a blessing when you had me in that neck lock, and I changed your name to Israel? Well, that's the name I want you to go by from now on, to remind you that you won my blessing fair and square. As God Almighty I therefore pronounce the same blessing on you that I pronounced on Abraham and Isaac, that many nations and many kings will come from you and all this land will one day belong to your descendants. That promise is now totally yours."

The words were as thrilling as the first time Jacob had heard God say them, so he raised up another pillar of rock and again poured oil over it and, along with a sacrificial drink-offering, dedicated it to the great God of Bethel. Then it was back on the trail and south to Bethlehem.

It was on the way down, though, that tragedy struck.

Rachel, who'd been pregnant with her second child for some time now, suddenly went into heavy labour and she was in agony. The strain of the birth drained her of all the life she had in her, but just before she died the baby was born. The midwife quickly told her it was a boy. With her last breath, Rachel whispered the name, "Benjamin."

Grief swept through the entire clan as they buried Rachel right beside the road they were on. Jacob marked her grave with a pillar of rock, which soon became a well-known landmark. Despite their grief, they had to move on, further south to Hebron where, amazingly, Jacob's father Isaac was still alive, even after all those years of Jacob being away.

Isaac stayed alive to the ripe old age of 180, and was buried by Jacob and Esau together. Esau then went back home to Edom, but Jacob stayed put in Hebron.

His Dad's home and his Grandpa's home had now become his. Just as God had promised, Jacob was back in the home of his childhood, but this time as head of the clan, like his Grandpa and his Dad before him.

Chapter 23 - Joseph, the golden boy....

But just like Abraham and Isaac, Jacob wasn't exactly perfect, either.

Trouble began to bubble and brew for Jacob because of Rachel's first son Joseph, who by now was a strapping young seventeen year old.

It was no secret that Jacob had a soft spot for Joseph, and Joseph soon cottoned on he was onto a good thing. When his Dad gave him a very expensive and beautifully coloured robe, but didn't give any such robe to any of his brothers, Joseph knew he was Dad's golden boy, which he then used to great advantage to torment his older brothers.

It was Joseph's job to help his older brothers, Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher, with the sheep. The older boys, being boys, would often get up to things they shouldn't, so Joseph would report their antics to his Dad. Jacob would just beam at the lad, believing every word he said, and the brothers would be hauled up in front of Jacob for a good talking to later.

To Joseph it was all a great game but after a while his brothers really began to hate him. It was clear that their Dad could not see what Joseph was up to, and the way Dad made it so obvious he loved Joseph best, made them sick. Whenever the brothers were together now, they could only talk about Joseph and how they'd love to wring his scrawny little neck.

What happened next didn't soften their feelings toward Joseph, either.

Joseph had a dream, a dream so humiliating to his brothers he simply couldn't wait to tell them all about it!

"You've just got to hear about this dream I had," he cried, rushing up to them, his eyes alight with cheekiness, "It went like this, you see. We were all out in the field together during harvest time and we were binding up the grain into sheaves when, all of a sudden, the sheaf I'd just been working on lifted off the ground and stood upright all by itself. Amazing, eh?"

"But you'll never guess what happened next," Joseph snickered, scarcely able to contain his glee at the reaction he was going to get. "Well, the sheaves you were working on all gathered round my sheaf and they bowed right down in front of it, like my sheaf was a king or something. So, what do you think of that, then?"

There was a stunned silence, then to Joseph's embarrassment the brothers suddenly burst out laughing, followed by a lengthy bout of snorting, hooting and collapsing on each other in helpless mirth.

"So you think you're going to be a great king and rule over us, do you?" one of them spluttered, after he'd recovered enough to speak. "Well, you just listen to me, Joseph," he said, his voice turning ugly and his face quickly moving from laughter to hatred, "we've had all we can take from little Daddy's boy, so get out of our sight and take your stupid dreams with you."

But Joseph had another dream, and even better than the last one!

"In my dream," he said, making sure his Dad was beside him this time when he told it to his brothers, "the sun, moon and eleven stars were all bowing down to me."

Again, the stunned silence.

His Dad was the first to react but none too kindly, however.

"What on earth are you implying by this dream of yours, Joseph? Are you saying that your Mother and I, and all your brothers here, are actually going to come and bow down before you? That's utterly preposterous." On the other hand, Jacob couldn't help wondering if maybe there was some truth to it and God really did have something special in store for his son.

The same thought had also crossed the minds of Joseph's brothers, but in them it only fuelled the flames of their jealousy. Given the chance, they would now kill Joseph.

Well, the chance to kill him suddenly came when Jacob sent Joseph back to Shechem, to see how his brothers were coping with Jacob's sheep up there.

When the brothers caught sight of Joseph approaching, they could hardly believe their luck.

"Hey, it's Daddy's boy," one of them shouted, "dreamer Joseph himself, far away from home and no Daddy to hide behind."

"We've got him right where we want him," another brother sneered, "Come on, here's our chance to get rid of the brat, once and for all. We can kill him and throw his body in that dry water cistern over there, where no one will ever find him. We can tell Dad he got eaten by a lion. This is it; bye-bye golden boy, and bye-bye to your stupid dreams, too."

A shudder of excitement rippled through the brothers, all except Reuben, the oldest.

"No," he shouted, grabbing at the sleeves of his closest brothers, "no, don't kill him. Throw him into the cistern, yes, but we can't kill him, he's our brother."

It was a tricky moment as they teetered between their desire for Joseph's blood on the one hand and the look of desperate appeal on Reuben's face on the other, but if they settled for just the cistern, Reuben knew he had a chance at sneaking Joseph out later and helping him escape. It was all Reuben could think of in the heat of the moment, but would his brothers go for it?

"All right, Reuben, no blood, just the cistern," one of the brothers replied, "but he'll end up just as dead in the cistern anyway, so who cares?"

Well, that seemed to satisfy everyone, so they quickly crept into position ready to pounce on the unsuspecting Joseph when he reached them. Reuben didn't want any part of it, so he left, fully intending to return later to help Joseph escape.

Joseph, meanwhile, walked right into the trap and managed only a brief strangled cry as ten of his brothers hurtled out from behind the rocks and landed on him. The tustle was over in seconds. They ripped off Joseph's robe, the one his Dad had given him, dragged him over to the empty water cistern and tossed him in. With Joseph silenced for good, they all sat down to eat, feeling very satisfied with themselves.

Chapter 24 - Joseph is taken to Egypt....

During the meal, one of Joseph's brothers happened to look up and saw a narrow cloud of dust in the distance, the telltale sign of travellers on the trail. As the camel caravan drew nearer, the riders appeared to be Ishmaelite traders, which suddenly triggered an idea in Judah's head.

"Now, why didn't we think of that before?" he cried. "Instead of killing Joseph we could sell him and make some money."

The Ishmaelite traders turned out to be Midianite merchants heading down to Egypt carrying several camel loads of perfume to sell. They agreed to buy the bruised and dusty Joseph for twenty pieces of silver.

Reuben, of course, knew none of this, so he was in for a horrible shock when he yelled down into the cistern later and discovered Joseph wasn't there. He was so distressed he ripped his clothes and ran in panic to his brothers, shouting, "The boy's gone, the boy's gone."

When they told him what they'd done, Reuben went weak at the knees and collapsed in a heap on the ground moaning, "What am I going to do? And who's going to tell Dad we just sold his favourite son as a slave to some Ishmaelite traders? He's going to love that, isn't he? You fools, we'll be lucky if he doesn't flay us alive."

"So," one of the brothers piped in, "why don't we go with the idea we thought of earlier and tell Dad that Joseph was eaten by a lion?"

"Hey, yes, that would do it," another brother said, "we could kill a goat, splatter its blood all over Joseph's robe, rip up the robe a bit and pretend we found it in a pool of blood. We can say we couldn't find his body, so wild animals must've eaten him." It was a wild idea but pools of blood would be all that was left of them if their Dad found out what they'd really done to his golden boy.

It was now Jacob's turn to be lied to, just like he'd lied to his Dad, too. And just like Isaac, he had no way of knowing the real truth either, so when the brothers told him their story, he believed it. "Yes, that's Joseph's robe," he said, his heart breaking, "Oh my son, my dearest son Joseph, torn to pieces by wild animals. I cannot bear to think about it," and for months no one could comfort the poor man. He was inconsolable. He ripped off his clothes, dressed himself in sackcloth, poured ashes all over his body and cried every day 'til his heart broke. "I will never get over this until the day I die, and even beyond that," he sobbed.

Joseph, meanwhile, had arrived safe and sound in Egypt and been bought by one of the staff in Pharaoh's palace, a man called Potiphar, a captain of the guard and an important man.

And it was here in Egypt, of all places, that those dreams Joseph had in his teenage were about to come true.

Chapter 25 - Tamar's twins...

In the meantime a very strange story took shape around the antics of Judah, the same Judah who had come up with the idea of selling Joseph. Judah had a longing to head south, so off he went and in his travels fell in love with Bathshua, a Canaanite girl, which his Dad would have heartily disagreed with.

Despite his Dad's disapproval, Judah married Bathshua and in time she gave birth to three boys, Er, Onan and Shelah. When Er grew up Judah found a wife for him, named Tamar, but Er was such an awful person that God himself took the man's life, which left Tamar without a husband and no child to carry on the family name.

According to custom the family name could be continued, however, if a brother of the dead husband got his wife pregnant, which in this case was Er's brother Onan. But Onan refused to get Tamar pregnant because if Tamar had a child, the child would get his brother Er's inheritance and Onan wouldn't.

Onan was obviously just as bad as his brother, so God took Onan's life, as well. That left only Shelah, Judah's third son, to get Tamar pregnant, but Shelah was way too young for that, so Judah asked Tamar to stay on in his home until Shelah was old enough to provide her with a child.

But when Shelah was old enough, Judah did not give him to Tamar after all, so in desperation for a child Tamar took things into her own hands by getting herself pregnant by Judah, instead!

This she managed very cleverly on the day Judah was off to Timnath to shear sheep. Without Judah knowing, she dressed up like a prostitute, hurried out to where the road forks into Timnath, and waited for him.

When Judah saw her, he took her up on her offer of sex, not recognizing the woman as his daughter-in-law because her face was covered with a veil.

She asked him what he was willing to pay. "I'll send you a young goat," he said. "I accept," Tamar said, "but I need some sort of guarantee you'll pay up. I'll take that seal with your signature on it hanging round your neck, and the walking stick you're holding." He handed them over and Tamar got what she came for; she became pregnant by Judah.

Later, when Judah sent the goat by a friend to get his seal and walking stick back, no one had a clue who the woman was. When Judah himself started asking around about the prostitute at the fork in the road to Timnath, no one knew of anyone staking out that spot. Afraid of people laughing at him, Judah gave up the search.

Three months later, however, Judah found out that Tamar had got herself pregnant by pretending she was a prostitute, and he was furious. "Bring her out and burn her," he snarled.

Tamar was dragged out of the house but as soon as she appeared she started screaming, "The father of my child is the man who owns these things," and immediately began waving Judah's seal and walking stick in the air! Judah ran across to her, ripped the objects out of her hand, only to discover they were his!

"Oh, Tamar," he cried, in both embarrassment and compassion, "I am so sorry. I should've given Shelah to you and instead I made you resort to this."

Tamar's pregnancy, meanwhile, turned out to be twins. But when she went into labour, the first twin to be born only appeared briefly. He stuck out his hand, nothing more, and then pulled it back in again and disappeared! Just before he disappeared, though, the midwife managed to tie a tiny piece of red thread round his wrist so she'd know he was the one who appeared first.

But suddenly, out popped the other twin, giving the poor mid-wife quite a shock! He became little Perez, while the twin with the red thread who had been first but ended up being the second son to be born, became Zerah, meaning 'scarlet'.

Judah now had two sons by his own daughter-in-law, adding yet more regret to Jacob's life, as his sons either horribly messed up their lives or tragically disappeared like Joseph.

Chapter 26 - Joseph is thrown in jail...

Joseph, however, was doing extremely well down in Egypt. His boss, Potiphar, was delighted with him. God was blessing Joseph immensely, so that everything Joseph did turned out perfectly.

After watching Joseph in action and seeing how everything he did was so successful, Potiphar eventually put Joseph in charge of his entire household, trusting him with everything he owned. The only effort Potiphar had to exert himself was to lift his fork to his mouth to eat, because Joseph took care of everything else!

But Joseph had one big problem; Potiphar's wife. She was totally besotted with Joseph, which wasn't all that surprising, though, because Joseph was not only extremely capable he was also strikingly good-looking and very well-built.

She decided, therefore, to get Joseph for herself. She used all her womanly wiles to try to get him to have sex with her, but he wouldn't give in.

"Don't you realize," Joseph protested, "that you're asking me to do something I simply cannot do? Your husband trusts me totally, he's given me everything in this house to look after. He trusts me so much he considers me as important in his house as he is. He holds nothing back from me, only you. Would I now take advantage of that privilege to take his wife, as well? I think not. That would be a hateful thing to do to him - and it would be a sin against God, too. So, the answer is no, and it will always be no. I will never break my master's trust."

But she wouldn't accept his 'no' and she kept pestering him every day, until Joseph couldn't stand being in her company anymore.

Even then she didn't give up.

She knew his routine by heart by now, so one day she sent all her servants outside and she hid in one of the rooms on Joseph's regular tour of the household. When he walked into the room, he had no idea she was there, so he got the fright of his life when she leapt out from her hiding place and grabbed the skirt-like wrap round his waist and started tugging at it.

"Come on," she said, her eyes so inviting, "it's just the two of us now," and with a determined yank, she ripped the wrap right off him!

To his horror, Joseph looked down and saw he had nothing on below his waist, and the woman, sensing his hesitation, was seizing her advantage and moving in fast. Joseph didn't wait another second. He tore away from her and ran for the door. He didn't care what he looked like, he just ran and kept running 'til he was completely clear of the house, and especially clear of her.

Potiphar's wife was now extremely angry.

"How dare he reject me like that?" she fumed. She clenched her fists in frustration and in doing so realized she still had Joseph's wrap in her hand. She looked at it for a few seconds and smiled wickedly as a plan came to mind.

She ran to the doorway and started screaming, "Help me, help me, help me," as loud as she could, which immediately brought all the servants rushing in, just as she hoped it would. "Oh, thank you for coming so quickly," she whimpered, "That awful Hebrew slave my husband bought broke in here just a few seconds ago and tried to rape me. When I screamed he ran out of here so fast he even left his wrap behind. See, here it is."

The servants gasped in horror. Joseph, do a thing like that? But there was no denying the evidence, because that was definitely Joseph's wrap she was holding. How dreadful, they all thought.

But that was nothing compared to how Potiphar reacted when he arrived home and his wife told him the whole shameful story all over again. She really put on a show this time and it was so convincing that Potiphar stormed out of the room in a purple fit, ordered the nearest guards to seize Joseph and throw him in the guardhouse with all the other prisoners, and to never let him out.

There was nothing Joseph could do about it, and he knew it. Who on earth was going to believe his side of the story when Potiphar's wife had his wrap to wave around as evidence?

He marvelled at how quickly his circumstances had changed. One minute he was the captain of the guard's most loved and trusted assistant and next minute, this. He'd had no chance to defend himself or prove his innocence, and now he'd lost everything, his job, his reputation and his friendship with Potiphar. The future looked grim indeed; he could even be stuck in this prison for the rest of his life. Had God all of a sudden deserted him?

No, God hadn't, because everything Joseph did in the prison turned out successfully, too! And just as Potiphar had given him charge of his entire household, the prison governor soon had Joseph running the entire prison, despite the fact that Joseph was still a prisoner himself! But, why not, the governor thought, when a smooth-running prison made the governor look good!

Chapter 27 - The cupbearer and the baker....

Meanwhile, things were not going well for two important men over in Pharaoh's palace. Pharaoh's chief cupbearer and chief baker had offended their mighty king so badly that they'd been thrown into the guardhouse, too. And being such important people, the prison governor had quickly handed them over to Joseph to look after.

One night both men had very disturbing dreams. When Joseph saw them moping around next morning and how haggard they looked, he asked them what on earth had happened.

"We each had a dream last night," one of them shuddered in reply, "dreams so vivid we both feel they're telling us something vitally important about our future. But neither of us can sort out what it is and we can't find anyone who can help us, either."

"Ah, but God can," Joseph said, "so tell me what you saw in your dreams."

"Well," the cupbearer said, "in my dream there was this grapevine with three branches. Flowers appeared on the branches which then developed into tiny grape buds and finally into full-grown grapes. When the grapes ripened, I picked them off the vine and squeezed them into Pharaoh's wine cup, which I gave to Pharaoh who was standing beside me. That's it. It doesn't sound like much of a dream, I know, but it's driving me crazy."

As Joseph listened, God gave him the meaning to the dream.

"Well, it's all quite simple," Joseph said, "the three branches picture three days. And you're right, the dream is about your future, because in three days you will be taken out of here and

given back your old job as Pharaoh's chief cupbearer, handing him his wine cup just like you used to."

"But that's marvellous," the cupbearer cried, "you've really put my mind to rest, Joseph. How can I ever thank you?"

Joseph thought for a moment and suddenly a ray of hope began to shine. "I've got an idea," he replied, "that could get me released from this wretched prison, as well. When you get the chance, after things have been going well for a while between you and Pharaoh and he trusts you again, mention my name to him and ask him if he would reconsider my case, too. He'll have already changed his verdict for you so he might do the same for me if he finds out I didn't do anything to deserve what happened to me, either."

Before the cupbearer could reply, however, the chief baker jumped in, hoping Joseph could interpret his dream next, especially after hearing how well the cupbearer's dream had turned out.

"How about my dream, Joseph?" he burst in, "I had a dream too, remember, but in my dream I had three baskets of bread balanced on top of my head. The top basket was crammed full with every possible delicacy a baker could make for a Pharaoh, but birds kept diving in and pecking at the goodies and eating them. So, give me the good news, Joseph, what does my future hold?"

Again, as Joseph listened to the dream, God gave him the meaning.

It wasn't good news this time, though. "Those three baskets on your head also picture three days," Joseph said, "but in three days time Pharaoh is going to have your head chopped off and have the rest of you hanged from a tree where the birds will peck the flesh right off your bones."

The baker staggered back as though he'd been hit by a hippopotamus. If Joseph was right, then in three days he'd be dead.

In three days time it was also Pharaoh's birthday. To make the day special Pharaoh had ordered a banquet for all his palace staff. He'd also been checking further into what the cupbearer and the baker had done, since questions had been raised. By the time his birthday rolled around, Pharaoh had discovered to his delight that his cupbearer had not been wrong after all, but the baker's crime, by comparison, was actually much worse than he thought.

During the banquet, therefore, he sent for the two men and there they stood in the huge banquet hall, in front of the whole crowd, while a hush settled over the room.

The Pharaoh explained how he'd been doing some checking for himself and it now gave him great pleasure to announce that his cupbearer was innocent and he could have his job back.

In a show of restored trust he immediately put out his hand for the cupbearer to pass him his wine. Pharaoh took a sip, smiled, and handed the cup back to the cupbearer.

But his face immediately turned from pleasure to anger. He slammed his sceptre against the arm of his throne, causing the entire crowd to jump with alarm, and he glared at his chief baker. He described the man's crimes in detail and ordered the palace guards to take the wretched man outside, lop off his head and hang the rest of him from the closest tree for the birds to peck at.

Chapter 28 - Pharaoh's dreams....

Everything Joseph had predicted about the cupbearer and the baker had come true, but in the joy of the moment the cupbearer completely forgot to ask Pharaoh to look into Joseph's case, as well.

Two more years had to pass, while Joseph waited in hope, before something happened to jog the cupbearer's memory. It was another dream that did it, but this time it was Pharaoh who had the dream, not the cupbearer.

In Pharaoh's dream, he was standing by the River Nile, when his eye caught a movement down by the shoreline. It was nothing out of the ordinary, just some cows climbing slowly up the bank to graze contentedly amongst the reeds. He watched them, counting seven cows in all, but what really caught his attention was how healthy they looked. They were plump and their coats glistened in the sunshine. They were fine looking specimens.

He was about to turn away when he caught sight of seven more cows climbing the bank towards them. They were horribly skinny and their coats were dull but what really caught his attention this time was how fast they were moving up the bank and the ugly look in their eyes as they ploughed through the reeds to the very same spot where the seven healthy cows were. In a final charge, the ugly cows crashed into the seven healthy cows, knocked them to the ground and ate them!

Pharaoh jerked awake, his heart racing. But it wasn't long before he calmed down, fell asleep again and had another dream. It was just like the first dream, only this time he saw a seedling of grain break through the surface of the soil and grow into a fine strong stalk carrying seven plump seeds at the top.

Just as it was ripening nicely in the hot summer sun, however, another stalk with seven seeds appeared right beside it. The stalk was bent and the seeds had been shrivelled up by the wind. Suddenly, without warning, the shrivelled stalk leant over and gobbled up the healthy one, an exact repeat of the skinny cows eating up the healthy cows in the other dream he'd had.

This time when Pharaoh woke up, he was sweating. Two dreams in a row and the same things happening. This had to be more than coincidence. He couldn't get the dreams out of his mind and that made him think he'd better find out if they meant something significant.

But there wasn't an interpreter of dreams or a wise old head in his entire kingdom who could tell him for certain what his dreams meant. In and out of the palace they trooped while Pharaoh's gloom deepened, which greatly increased his demand for wine, which in turn required the presence of his cupbearer, who happened to be on call at the very moment Pharaoh yelled in frustration, "Isn't there anyone out there who can interpret my dreams?" and that's when the little bell began to tinkle in the cupbearer's mind.

"Your majesty," the cupbearer said, as the memories came flooding back, "do you remember the time you were angry with the chief baker and me and you packed us off to the guardhouse?"

There was a disinterested grunt from Pharaoh's direction.

"Well," the cupbearer continued, "there was something I forgot to tell you. One night the baker and I both had strange dreams and, like you, we went searching for someone to explain them for us. Well, it just so happened there was this Hebrew slave in jail with us, a man called Joseph, and just like that he told us what our dreams meant. It was amazing. He told me you would give me my job back and he told the baker you would hang him. He was right both times."

"Was he now?" Pharaoh replied, looking up with interest now, "So, where is this man, Joseph?"

"He's in the guardhouse, my lord," the cupbearer replied.

"Well, let's get him up here, then," Pharaoh yelled, jumping off his throne, "Come on, guards, don't just stand there, fetch him, now."

Joseph could hear them coming, first the sound of running feet and then the thunderous banging on the guardhouse door. The door flew open to frantic cries of, "Where's Joseph?"

Where's Joseph?" and on being told that he was Joseph, the guards immediately whisked him off to the palace baths, told him to wash and shave and change his clothes, and make it quick because Pharaoh wanted to see him right away.

With his heart thudding, Joseph got ready as fast as he could and before he could even pause to think, he found himself being rushed into Pharaoh's throne room and right into the presence of Pharaoh himself.

"You are here, Joseph," Pharaoh announced, as soon as Joseph stood before him, "because I had a dream which no one has been able to explain as yet, but I heard from my cupbearer here that you can explain any dream you hear. Is that right?"

"Well no, that's not quite right," Joseph replied a little shakily, "it's not me who interprets people's dreams it's God who does that through me, but that's why you can be absolutely certain the explanations I give are accurate."

"In that case," Pharaoh replied, "I will describe what I saw in my dreams and you and your God can give the explanation."

As Pharaoh began and Joseph listened, God again helped him understand what the dreams meant, so that Joseph was ready with the interpretation just as soon as Pharaoh finished.

"Well, it's quite clear what your dreams mean," Joseph said, to an audible sigh of relief from all those listening, and especially from the cupbearer. "The dreams both mean the same thing. God is telling you what he himself is about to do. The seven plump healthy cows and the seven plump seeds of grain represent seven years of bumper harvests all over Egypt. The seven skinny cows and the seven shrivelled seeds of grain represent seven terrible years of famine after that. Seven wonderful years followed by seven awful years, and because you dreamed the same dream twice, you can be absolutely sure that God will make it happen."

Joseph immediately recognized the urgency of what he'd just said, so he kept right on talking before Pharaoh could get a word in.

"Please take these dreams seriously, your excellency," Joseph pleaded, "and find a man who has the vision and the wisdom to organize the storing of food during the good years so there'll be enough to see us through the awful years that follow. It can be done if we get started right away. All you need do," Joseph continued boldly, "is appoint officers in every city and town to collect 20% of everything produced in the next seven years and pack it away in huge airtight storage bins. Stamp your Pharaoh's seal on every bin so that nobody dare touch them because that 20% is all we're going to have to see us through the seven years after that, when the famine hits."

Pharaoh leaned back on his throne, very impressed with everything Joseph had said.

After a short but tense silence, he leaned forward again, beckoning to all his officials to come up to the throne, where he quietly asked them what they thought of it all.

They were clearly just as impressed as he was with the entire plan Joseph had recommended. They all agreed they'd better get to work right away, but who on earth could organize it all? This would be a huge job requiring someone of extraordinary ability. Pharaoh then nodded his head slightly in Joseph's direction and whispered, "Well, what about him? Is there anyone you know quite like this man Joseph here, with a God like he's got with him?"

They all murmured and nodded their agreement. They had their man standing right there!

"Joseph," Pharaoh said, as the officers scurried back to their places, "my officers and I all agree that since God has made all this known to you, then you must also be the man with the vision and the wisdom to do what's needed. So, with that in mind, I hereby place you in charge over everyone in my palace and from now on they will all do exactly as you command. Because I'm Pharaoh, you cannot have a position higher than mine, but as far as who is in charge, I now

give you total authority over all Egypt," and so saying he stepped down off his throne, took off his royal signet ring and put it on Joseph's finger instead!

It was all so sudden, that Joseph nearly fell over. Could this really be happening, or was he having a wild dream, too?! How quickly he'd been thrown into the guardhouse when he fell out with Potiphar's wife, but it was nothing compared to the speed at which he had now become the ruler of all Egypt!

But there was no time to hang around wondering and marvelling because Pharaoh was already off his throne and waving his arms around, yelling to his palace staff to bring the finest clothes available to dress Joseph in and ordering an official to bring a solid gold chain which Pharaoh hung round Joseph's neck himself.

He then escorted Joseph out of the palace and personally presented him with the royal chariot and his royal guard, a select group of highly trained officers who would travel with Joseph wherever he went, to clear the way. "From now on Joseph," Pharaoh said, as they strolled back to the palace, "I am still the Pharaoh, but no one in all Egypt does anything without your permission first. So, off you go and get to work, you great revealer of secrets! Oh, and by the way, to show you how grateful I am, may I offer you the hand of a most lovely woman to be your wife, the beautiful daughter of the priest of On, the lady Asenath."

Chapter 29 - Feast and famine....

And so it was that Joseph, at the tender age of only 30, became Pharaoh's personal assistant, just as he'd been Potiphar's personal assistant and the prison governor's personal assistant before that.

But this time Joseph ruled the entire country, not just a jail or a man's home. He marvelled at how God could lift a man so quickly from the depths to the heights when the time was right. Well, the time right now was obviously right, because Egypt faced terrible starvation in seven years' time unless he got to work immediately. He excused himself from the palace, and with the royal guard making a fearful racket yelling at everyone to get out of the way, he made a tour of inspection of the country from top to bottom.

In each city and town he put a skilled man in charge of collecting and storing 20% of the huge quantities of grain and other crops that would soon be coming in. Just in time, too, because that summer the seven years of bumper crops began. The harvest was so huge that first year they gave up trying to measure out 20% and simply filled every storage bin available to bursting point and put Pharaoh's stamp on it.

For seven years it was like this, with Joseph constantly on the move from town to town checking and rechecking how things were going, and even he was amazed at how much was being tucked away. By the end of the seventh year he reported back to Pharaoh that they had enough food stored away in the royal storage bins to feed the whole world if need be!

Meanwhile, Joseph and his wife Asenath somehow found time during these hectic years to have two children, two boys, Manasseh the oldest, named by Joseph in honour of God helping him through all his troubles, and Ephraim, named in honour of God blessing Joseph so incredibly in Egypt. Not long after the two boys were born, the famine hit.

It turned out just like the skinny cows and the shrivelled seeds in Pharaoh's dreams. It was

awful. It soon ate up all the food the Egyptians had stored away for themselves, so an appeal went up to Pharaoh to open up the royal storage bins in every city to sell them food, which he did.

There was so much food stored away in those bins, the Egyptians had way more than they needed, which was great news in other countries where the famine had also struck. Like long trails of ants, people began pouring into Egypt to buy food.

Among the many who heard the rumour about all this food down in Egypt was Joseph's Dad, Jacob. The famine had hit hard back in Canaan, too, so when news arrived that Egypt was selling to anyone in need, Jacob roused his sons to immediate action.

"Come on you lazy lot," he chided, "what do you hope to accomplish standing around feeling sorry for yourselves and gawping at each other? Saddle up the donkeys and get yourselves down to Egypt and buy us some food before we all starve to death. Not you, Benjamin, you're too young, but the rest of you, be off with you, now."

Chapter 30 - Joseph meets his brothers....

The brothers soon joined the long trail of travellers heading wearily down to Egypt. They arrived many days later and joined a crowd at one of the main supply bins, where they soon picked out the man in charge, a striking young man and clearly a very important man too, judging by his clothes and that extremely valuable gold chain hanging round his neck.

When it came to their turn to buy food, all ten brothers bowed low to the ground in front of this very important man, who reacted with great surprise when he saw them, because he knew who they were. They were his brothers!

But Joseph didn't let on who he was. "So, where do you lot come from, then?" he demanded, in the haughtiest tone he could muster.

"We came all the way from Canaan to buy food," one of his brothers replied.

"I don't believe you," Joseph snapped back, "anybody can see you're spies. You're just pretending you're down here for food but what you're really here for is to spy out the weak points in our defences, right?"

"No, please, really," one of the brothers quickly replied, "it's food we're after. We wouldn't lie to you."

"Oh, wouldn't you?" Joseph replied, "Well, you look just like spies to me."

One of the brothers stood up and bravely stepped forward. "My lord, we are not spies. We came from Canaan, where our father still lives. All of us here are his sons. There were twelve of us at one time but one brother disappeared and the youngest boy had to stay home."

"Well, that's a very touching story I must say," Joseph replied sarcastically, "but I still think you're spies. So, let's see if you're telling the truth, shall we? You say you have another brother at home who didn't come with you, right? Good. Then one of you will go back and fetch him while I keep the rest of you here in prison. None of you will see the light of day again if that brother isn't brought to me personally. If you're lying, by the life of Pharaoh I will treat you all as spies."

Joseph then ordered them to be thrown in jail for the next three days and he confiscated all their silver money.

By the third day of their stint in prison, Joseph had changed his plan a bit.

"I'm going to spare your lives if you do exactly what I say," he told them. "I'm a godfearing man, and since you say you're being honest, I'm offering you a deal. I'll keep just one of you in prison as a hostage while the rest of you may go. You can buy up as much grain as you need and take it home with you, but you must return with your youngest brother or your brother here will die. Agreed?"

They all nodded their heads in silent agreement, all except Reuben who spun round and glared at his brothers, and then exploded with anger.

"You know why all this is happening to us, don't you?" he yelled, "It's because we sold Joseph to those traders, that's what. Remember how he begged and pleaded with us not to let him go? Remember that? The poor little fellow was scared out of his wits, but did you care? No, you didn't. Well, don't be surprised if you're getting a dose of your own treatment in return, because you scumbags deserve every bit of it. You're such idiots, all of you. Didn't I warn you this might happen, that we'd better not mess with the boy? But no, you just closed your ears and plunged on regardless. And now look at us, we're about to pay dearly for what we did."

Reuben's outrage at what they'd done to him brought Joseph to instant tears. He quickly excused himself before they guessed he could understand their language. Up to this point he'd spoken to them through a translator so they spoke freely among themselves in Hebrew, never guessing that Joseph understood every word they were saying!

Joseph took a few minutes to compose himself and then returned and pointed to Simeon as the one who would be kept as hostage. In front of all the other brothers, he had Simeon tied up and dragged off to another cell.

Meanwhile, Joseph had given orders to have all his brothers' grain bags filled and their travel sacks packed with enough food for them and their donkeys, to see them home. He also gave orders to have all their silver money returned and placed just under the flaps of their travel sacks so they'd find it when they stopped for the night and unpacked their bags.

Which is exactly what happened. At their first camp overnight, one of the brothers opened his travel sack to take out some feed for his donkey and, to his astonishment, there was all his money staring at him!

"Come and look at this," he shouted to his brothers, "See? It's all my money. I found it just under the flap here. I didn't put it there because that Egyptian chap confiscated it, remember? So, now what do we do? We can't go back because he'll think we didn't pay for our grain and he'll brand as liars and cheats, as well as spies."

They quickly checked each travel bag, with the same result, and they all felt very frightened. "What is God doing to us now?" one of them whispered, voicing what they were all thinking.

It was a quiet journey home, each of them dreading what Jacob would say when he found out what had happened. When they finally got home and began their sorry tale, especially the bit about finding all their money in their travel sacks, Jacob burst into tears.

"Do you realize what you boys have done to me?" he wailed, "First I lose Joseph, then you rob me of my Simeon and now you want to take Benjamin away from me, as well? How could you do that to me? All of you are against me."

"That's not true, Dad," Reuben said quickly, "I'll bring Benjamin back, trust me. You can kill my own sons if I don't."

"No Reuben," Jacob said sadly, "I'm not letting Benjamin go with you. I've already lost one son and if any harm comes to Benjamin it'll be the death of me for certain."

What on earth were they going to do now? They were well and truly stuck. Jacob was refusing to let Benjamin out of his sight but Simeon was languishing in an Egyptian jail, still

under suspicion he was a spy. If they didn't return to Egypt, Simeon would be killed but if they returned without Benjamin, Simeon would be killed for that, too.

But they had to return to Egypt because the food they'd brought from Egypt soon ran out, which prompted Jacob to send his sons back to Egypt for more.

It was Judah's turn to speak up this time. "But Dad, we daren't show our faces in Egypt if we haven't got Benjamin with us. Remember what that man said? He said we'd better show up with Benjamin, or else. We'll go, but only if Benjamin comes with us, because we're certainly not risking our necks, or Simeon's neck, turning up without him."

"Whatever made you tell the man you had another brother in the first place?" Jacob growled.

"We had no choice, Dad," Judah replied, "the man kept on asking detailed questions about our family, like 'Is your father still alive?' and 'Do you have any other brothers?' We had no idea he'd actually want to see Benjamin; why would he? I mean, what possible interest could an Egyptian nobleman have in a Hebrew youngster? But for some strange reason he does, and we're stuck with it. So, come on Dad, send Benjamin with us. We can be on the road and away from here by sunset and save everyone's life, ours, yours, and the lives of our children too, because if we don't do something soon, we're all in trouble. I'll look after Benjamin, don't you worry, and if I don't bring him back then blame me for the rest of my life, but right now we're wasting time. We could've made the journey twice already, so what do you say?"

With a huge sigh, Jacob looked up at Judah. "I suppose you're right, son, but," he said, brightening up a little, "I think you should take a special gift to this man you keep talking about, like some of those perfumes we're famous for in these parts, and throw in some honey, pistachio nuts and almonds. He'll like those, and just in case there was some mistake with the money, take down double the amount so you can pay him for the first load, too. Go on then, take Benjamin with you, but make sure you go straight to this man as soon as you get there, and may Almighty God make him kind enough to let Simeon and Benjamin come back home again."

Chapter 31 - Joseph meets Benjamin at last....

When Joseph was told that his brothers had returned, he rushed outside to take a quick look. He noticed they had Benjamin with him, so he rushed back inside again shouting orders to his house manager to get a meal ready by midday and invite his brothers into the house right away.

When the brothers were told they were wanted immediately in the important man's house, they immediately suspected they were in serious trouble. "He must've found out about the silver," one of them moaned, as they walked slowly up the path to Joseph's house, "or he wouldn't have called us in like this, just as soon as we arrived, would he? He thinks we stole that money, which means we're sunk if we don't own up right away. He'll seize our donkeys and we'll all end up being slaves, you watch."

So one of them quickly approached the house-manager before they got to the front door. "My lord," he said urgently, "I have to tell you something before we go in. When we came here on our first visit to buy food and we were on our way home, we got the biggest surprise of our lives. We found all the money we'd used to buy the food in our travel packs. We haven't got a clue how it got there, and to prove to you that we never intended to steal it we brought the entire amount back with us, so we can pay up. And we'll pay for any food we buy this time, too."

The house-manager looked round at them and smiled. "Calm down, there's nothing to worry about. Who knows? Maybe your God hid the silver in your packs," he said, with a twinkle in his

eye, and he opened the door and ushered them inside. He told them he had to go find someone right away so off he went while they fidgeted nervously 'til he got back.

But what a shock they got a few minutes later, when suddenly there was a wild yell and there running to greet them was Simeon, very much alive and looking very well indeed! They had no idea that the someone the house-manager had said he'd gone to find was in fact, Simeon, so the surprise was complete.

The house-manager waited for the noise to die down a bit, then he ushered the travel dusty brothers into the bathing area and supplied them with water and towels, mentioning as he left the room, that he'd make sure their donkeys were fed and watered, too.

This was amazing. For some unknown reason they were being treated like honoured guests. But they still had to meet the great man himself yet, and then what would happen?

They were about to find out, because the house-manager returned yet again, this time to announce they'd all been invited by the big man himself to have lunch with him - which suddenly reminded one of the brothers that Jacob had sent them with gifts so they hurried off to fetch them and were all ready and waiting, with gifts in hand, as the great man stepped into the room to greet them.

They gave him the gifts, bowing as they did so and he, in return, asked them very nicely how they all were and asked again, "Is your father still alive?" and "Is he well?" to which they replied, bowing again, that yes, he was alive and yes, he was well. This wasn't going too badly at all, they thought, it was all very polite and pleasant.

The great man then looked over at Benjamin.

This was it! He'd wanted to meet Benjamin, but why?

"Now let's see," the man said with a big smile on his face, "would this fine young lad here be your youngest brother? Yes, it must be. What a good looking young man you are," and then, with what sounded like a choke in his voice, he said, "May God be so very kind to you, my boy," and then suddenly, without any explanation, he turned away and almost ran out of the room. What on earth had happened to make him do that?

It was seeing Benjamin that did it. Benjamin was the only real brother Joseph had, because he and Benjamin were the only two sons born to Rachel. And here was his younger brother right there with him after all those years apart. It had simply overwhelmed Joseph and he'd left the room very close to tears.

He had a good cry in another room, splashed a bit of water over his face to hide the tears and then headed back into the dining room to get lunch underway.

It was quite a gathering seated there at the tables. Off to the side sat the Egyptians in the household, since they weren't allowed to sit next to Hebrews, so that left Joseph and his brothers seated together. He introduced them to all those present, one by one, from the oldest, Reuben, all the way down to the youngest, Benjamin.

The brothers looked at each other in amazement. Instead of being in serious trouble, they were being treated like longlost friends!

Joseph then served the food himself, passing a heaped plate to each brother in turn, but they couldn't help noticing the huge amount Joseph gave to Benjamin. It was five times bigger than anyone else's!

What a feast it was, but at no point during the meal did Joseph tell anyone who he was. He was still keeping that a secret because he had another little surprise in store for his brothers.

He invited them to stay the night at the palace, which gave Joseph the chance to get his house-manager to fill up his brothers' travel packs with as much food as they could carry and stash their

money under the flaps again. But this time Joseph went one step further. He had his very own silver drinking cup slipped inside Benjamin's pack. None of his brothers thought to check their packs before leaving, which is exactly what Joseph hoped would happen.

Chapter 32 - The happy reunion....

As the morning sun peeped over the horizon, the brothers were all packed and ready to go. Joseph watched them leave and he kept watching until they were just outside the city limits.

It was then that he nudged his house-manager and said, "Right, now's the time you go chasing after them. Kick up a lot of dust and do a lot of shouting, and wave your arms frantically in the air so they get the idea there's something urgent going on and they'd better stop to find out. When they're all finally stopped and looking worried, tell them the bad news, and lay it on thick."

The house-manager knew exactly what to do because he and Joseph had plotted all this together the previous evening!

He shot off at a gallop yelling as he closed in on the brothers, "Stop, stop," and in one final cloud of dust and a lot of very impressive puffing and frantic waving of arms, he skidded up beside them.

When the brothers saw who it was, they immediately stopped and asked what the problem was.

"What a nerve you lot have got," the manager shouted between puffs, "Is this how you repay someone back in your country after they've fed you and put you up for the night? You just steal stuff out of their home and don't pay what you owe, do you?"

Oh, if only Joseph could see them now, the manager thought, as they sat there on their donkeys with their mouths open, gulping like stranded fish. But he hadn't got to the best bit yet; wait 'til they heard what they'd stolen and who'd done the stealing!

"How you thought you could get away with stealing my master's silver wine cup, I do not know," he continued, jumping off his horse and stabbing his finger at the closest brother, "And, what's more, he values that cup more than anything because he uses it for secret knowledge about the future." Which wasn't exactly true, but Joseph wanted it thrown in for good measure!

"How could you do such a thing?" the manager cried, spreading his hands wide in wonder, to finish off. Joseph would've been proud of him, he thought, it really was a brilliant job of acting!

When the power of speech finally returned to the brothers, one of them gasped, "My lord, how can you say such things? Never in our wildest dreams would we take your master's special cup. And we didn't leave without paying, either. You yourself saw us pay back all the silver we owed. We'd be stark-raving crazy to not pay again, and even crazier still to steal from your master. But if any of us really are that crazy and someone has stolen the wine cup, then frankly, whoever it is would be better off dead and the rest of us should become your slaves for life."

The manager was really enjoying himself now. "Very well," he said, as severely as he could, which was difficult because it was hard not to burst out laughing, "I accept, but I'll only make a slave out of the person who has the cup. The rest of you can go free."

On hearing that, they all leapt off their donkeys and lowered their travel-packs for the manager's inspection. He searched slowly and very deliberately through each pack, purposely starting with the oldest brother and working his way down, leaving Benjamin 'til last.

Sighs of relief could be heard down the line as each pack turned up clean, but sighs turned to gasps of horror when Benjamin's pack was opened and there, sparkling with guilt, was the master's cup!

This time the power of speech did not return to the brothers. They could only look in despair at Benjamin, rip at their clothes in utter anguish, then sit quietly back on their donkeys and follow the house-manager back into town to face the music.

Joseph was still in the house when they arrived and it was a sight for sore eyes seeing all his brothers throw themselves on the ground before him. How many times had they bowed before him now, just like his dreams of long ago said they would? Wait 'til they found out who he was, too; but not yet, though.

Joseph looked down at them, all lined up with their noses pressed to the ground. He didn't dare look at his house-manager, who, by now, was having serious trouble keeping a straight face! He then spoke angrily to his brothers, "Well now, that was a pretty stupid move wasn't it? I mean, any idiot could've guessed a man in my position likes to know about the future, so why steal the very cup he uses for that purpose, right out from under his nose?"

"What can we say, my lord?" Judah confessed, "You're absolutely right. God made sure we got caught, so here we all are, ready to be become your slaves, including Benjamin."

"No, no, no," Joseph cried, "I don't want all of you to be my slaves, just the one who stole my cup. The rest of you are free to go back home to your father, any time you like."

Judah stood up and shuffled toward Joseph with a look of utter desperation. "Please, my lord, I beg you, as your humblest of servants, I know you are as great as Pharaoh himself but let me speak and please don't be angry with me."

Joseph stared at him and then nodded his assent, so Judah began the most important, life and death speech he'd ever made.

"Do you remember, sir, the time you asked us whether we had a father and another brother back home and we told you 'yes we did' and how much our father loves that boy? And how you told us you wanted to see this brother, but we said we couldn't bring him because it would kill his father if we did?"

Joseph gave a brief nod and a wave of the hand as though it was some distant memory of little consequence.

"Do you also remember telling us," Judah continued, "that we'd better not show our faces in Egypt ever again if we didn't bring him to you? Well, we finally managed to persuade our father to send him with us, but please understand where he's coming from. He had two sons by the same wife, both of whom he loved more than the rest of us put together. Can you imagine, then, how devastated he was when he heard the older boy had been torn to pieces by wild animals? And then we come along saying we have to take away his youngest boy as well, all the way down here, when his whole life is bound up in that boy. It would take him to his grave if any harm comes to Benjamin, so if we return home and the boy isn't with us, our father will die of sorrow and it will be us who killed him. And since it was I who told father I'd make sure Benjamin would return safely, would you please take me in place of the boy and make me your slave instead?"

As Judah spoke, Joseph could feel the tears stinging his eyes. They had suffered enough. It was time to stop the pretence at last, so he asked all his attendants to leave the room so that just he and his brothers were left alone together.

When the door closed behind them, Joseph could contain himself no longer. He burst into tears and cried so loudly, he could even be heard outside the building!

"Oh, my brothers, my brothers, my dearest brothers, I am Joseph," he cried, "yes, Joseph your long lost brother. I'm alive!"

Eleven jaws dropped to the floor as one. Open mouths made only faint movements as words made an attempt to form. But it was no use, the brothers were speechless. They just stared at Joseph and said nothing.

From some far off distant planet somewhere, they heard Joseph say, "Come closer," and there he was again, only much closer this time, saying, "It's me, your brother Joseph, the very same Joseph you sold into Egypt. But don't let that worry you in any way," Joseph continued, prattling on in the silence, "God did it all on purpose, sending me on ahead of you so your lives could be saved now. We've got another five years of famine to go yet, but God made sure we'll have lots of survivors in our family. I know you thought you were being very clever getting rid of me, but it was God's plan all along to get me down here. And look what he's done, he's actually made your little brother into Pharaoh's right hand man and lord of all Egypt. Can you believe it?"

Believe it? They weren't anywhere close to the believing stage yet. All they could manage still was spasmodic, intermittent blinking, so Joseph kept talking. "Well, now that you know what's happened to me, hurry back to Dad and tell him God has made me ruler over all Egypt, and ask him to come on down here as soon as possible. We can all live in Goshen, it's easily big enough to hold all our children and grandchildren, and all our animals, too. If you're all down here with me I can make sure you've got everything you need to see you through. So, go and tell Dad about the huge respect I enjoy here in Egypt and get him to move down here right away."

He then threw his arms round Benjamin and the two of them hugged and cried. Eventually, the rest of his brothers came out of their daze and joined them, and they were able to talk at last about how to persuade Jacob to make the move.

Chapter 33 - The move to Egypt...

Word had already got back to the royal palace that Joseph's brothers had turned up. Pharaoh was delighted, as were all the palace staff.

"I heartily agree," Pharaoh cried, on hearing Joseph's plans, "yes, you need to get those brothers of yours back home right away and have them bring your whole family here. They can take my best wagons with them to transport themselves and all their belongings. Tell them not to worry about having to leave some of their stuff back in Canaan, we can more than make up for it by what we've got here. Remember, the best there is in the whole of Egypt is yours, the best land, the best everything. For your family, Joseph, nothing but the best will do!"

Joseph quickly kitted out his brothers with a brand new set of clothes for the journey home, but to Benjamin he gave 300 pieces of silver and five new sets of clothes. He sent twenty donkeys for his Dad, ten males carrying the finest creations in Egypt and ten females carrying provisions for the journey. All Joseph could do now was warn his brothers not to get into any fights with each other along the way, and wait.

When they arrived home and told Jacob they'd found Joseph, not only alive but ruling all of Egypt, as well, Jacob looked at them with much the same look they'd given Joseph.

He was so stunned he simply didn't believe them, so they took him outside to see all the splendid wagons Joseph had sent along with them. Jacob knew they could never afford such wagons themselves.

So it must be true, he thought, and then he got really excited. "Yes, yes I believe you, I believe you," he cried, "Joseph my son is alive. Well, what are we hanging around here for? We'd better get down to Egypt to see him right away before I get too old and die. So, come on boys, we've got some packing to do!"

They filled up Pharaoh's wagons with the children and grandchildren and all their possessions, and with their flocks and herds in tow, they said their 'goodbye' to the land of Canaan. On the way, Jacob took a sidetrip to Beersheba, the spot where his Grandpa Abraham and King Abimelech had made their agreement many years before, to offer sacrifices to God.

Again, God spoke to Jacob in a dream. "This trip you're taking down to Egypt, don't worry about it, it's going to work out just fine. I've got you all down there on purpose because I want to make you into a great nation while you're there. I'll go down to Egypt with you and I promise you, Jacob, I'll also bring you back here to your beloved Canaan one day and, what's more, I promise you that Joseph will be right there beside you when you die."

It was just the encouragement Jacob needed because it was a huge decision for him to uproot his family from their homeland and live in yet another country. There were seventy of them in the family to think of, counting all the children and grandchildren, but now that he knew the move tied in perfectly with God's plans, he felt much better. God had given him encouragement so many times already just before a big step in his life, and here it was happening again.

Jacob sent Judah on ahead to tell Joseph they were on their way, so Joseph was ready and waiting in his chariot to meet them on the day of their arrival.

The excitement at seeing his father again after all these years apart was overwhelming for Joseph, and on greeting Jacob he burst into tears and hugged him for a very long time. For Jacob it was an impossible dream come true and he just gazed and gazed at Joseph, hardly able to believe his eyes. "So, it really is true after all," Jacob said, grinning from ear to ear, "my boy is alive. And look at you, it's just amazing. Never in my wildest dreams did I believe this could happen. Here I thought I'd be going to my grave forever miserable at losing you and here you are standing here in all your glory!"

"Well, we'd better go tell Pharaoh you've arrived," Joseph said, "he's really been looking forward to meeting my family ever since he sent his wagons to fetch you. There's one thing you'll need to do, though, when we go in to meet him. He's going to ask you what your plans are now that you're here, so tell him the only thing you really know is how to look after animals, that you're a shepherd at heart and your family all down through the generations have been shepherds. It's just a way of guaranteeing we'll be able to settle in Goshen peaceably and without resentment from the Egyptians; I know what they think of shepherds, so they'll be jolly glad we're in Goshen, far away from them."

Rather than take his entire family to see Pharaoh, Joseph chose five of his brothers to go with him, and on meeting them Pharaoh did exactly as Joseph suspected. He asked his brothers what their plans were and they were right on the button with their answer. They said they were shepherds from a long line of shepherds in the family and they'd come to Egypt because food was scarce for their animals back in Canaan. They even asked Pharaoh if they could settle in Goshen.

"Of course," Pharaoh said, slapping his knee enthusiastically, "you can live anywhere you like. The choicest parts of Egypt are yours, but if you think Goshen is best because of all your animals, then Goshen is yours. Which reminds me, I also have a large herd of cattle so if anyone in your family has a real skill with animals, I'm offering him a job taking charge of my cattle,

too. We could do with some herdsmen who really know what they're doing, so the offer is there if you're interested."

How amazing! They'd only just arrived that day as total foreigners but they'd just been offered the best land in the country and jobs as Pharaoh's chief herdsmen!

It was Joseph's great pleasure to take his Dad to the palace next, and what a marvellous moment it was for Joseph as his dear old Dad and Pharaoh met for the first time. Pharaoh was clearly very impressed with Jacob's age, because he asked Jacob how old he was. "I'm 130 years old," Jacob replied, "and a hard slog those 130 years have been, too, but I'm still nowhere near as old as my father and grandfather were."

They talked a while longer, bid their farewells and then Joseph and Jacob headed back to Goshen, or what could now be called home. It was a beautiful area, especially the district of Rameses, so that's where they sunk their roots, only to find out later that they'd chosen the best spot in the entire country! The famine could throw its worst at them, but they never lacked anything they needed.

Chapter 34 - Staying alive in the famine....

The famine was so ferocious by now that food was running out all over Egypt, too. The farmers weren't harvesting enough to even feed themselves, let alone the rest of the people. The only food left was the 20% Joseph had stored away during the good years, so the line-ups got longer and longer as people came flocking to Pharaoh's storehouses to buy grain and other foodstuffs.

When the people's money ran out, Joseph accepted horses, sheep, cattle and donkeys in exchange for food, which kept the people fed for the rest of that year, but that was all.

By the end of the year the people ran out of animals they could exchange, as well.

Now what could they do? They'd starve if they didn't have something to offer for food so, in sheer desperation, they begged Joseph to accept their land and even themselves as slaves, in exchange for food. It didn't matter if it was only seed-corn they got, anything would do to keep them alive, and it would give them something to plant in the ground to stop it turning into desert.

Joseph agreed to their terms, but on one condition. He'd give them seed-corn to plant in exchange for their land, but whatever they managed to harvest from now on, 20% of it would belong to Pharaoh and would be stored in the royal grain bins, as before.

The people were more than satisfied with this arrangement because they no longer owned the land anyway, but they could still farm the land and live off it. 80% of the harvest still belonged to them and tucking away the other 20% in the royal storage bins could mean the difference between life and death if another famine struck in the future. It was a good arrangement.

Meanwhile, Jacob's family blossomed and flourished in Goshen. They kept on buying up more and more land and having more and more babies, well-fed and healthy, too. They were looking more like a nation than a family, which is exactly what God had promised Jacob he would do, make a nation of them.

For seventeen years Jacob had watched God stay true to his promise but the time came when he knew his own life was coming to an end, so he sent for Joseph with one last request.

"Joseph, I really don't think I'm going to live much longer, so I have a favour to ask of you, and promise me you'll do it. I don't want to be buried here in Egypt, I want to be buried alongside my father and the others in our family. Will you do that for me?"

"Yes I will," Joseph replied.
"Promise?" Jacob asked earnestly.
"Yes, Dad, I promise."

Chapter 35 - Joseph's boys....

Everything was unfolding just as God had promised Jacob at Beersheba seventeen years ago, that he would bring Jacob back to his homeland to be buried and Joseph would be there to make sure it happened. Jacob knelt down in thanks to God for all his marvellous promises over many, many years, every one of which God had fulfilled.

News then came to Joseph that his Dad had taken a turn for the worse, so he took his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, to see how he was. It took a while for Jacob to sit up in bed, but as soon as he was settled, he launched into a story.

"Joseph," he said, his face brightening up with the memory, "many years ago God Almighty came to me personally in Canaan and made me a promise. He promised he would create a whole host of nations out of my descendants, and the whole land of Canaan would be theirs for ever. Well, I now consider your two sons among those descendants, and as much my sons now as Reuben or Simeon are. All your other children will be counted as yours, but Ephraim and Manasseh will be counted as mine."

It was then that Jacob noticed Joseph had not come alone.

"I see you have some other people with you, Joseph, who are they?" he asked.

"They're the two sons you were talking about, Manasseh and Ephraim," Joseph replied.

"Then bring them closer to me, Joseph," Jacob said eagerly, "I want to bless them."

But his eyesight was so poor now that Jacob could hardly see them, so Joseph placed the boys on each of Jacob's knees, close enough for Jacob to reach out and touch them.

"Isn't it marvellous?" Jacob said, his arms holding the boys in place, "I never expected to ever see you again, my boy, but God has let me see your sons as well, and what a fine pair of boys they are. I'm glad you brought them with you, because now would be an excellent time for me to pass on my blessing to them."

Joseph stood the boys beside the bed, one on either side, Ephraim on Jacob's left and Manasseh on the right. Joseph expected his Dad to put his right hand on Manasseh's head, being the oldest, and his left hand on Ephraim, but Jacob deliberately crossed his arms and placed his right hand on Ephraim and his left hand on Manasseh.

Before Joseph had a chance to say anything, Jacob began his blessing, starting with a blessing on Joseph first and moving onto the two boys next. "May the great God in whose presence Abraham and Isaac lived, and the same great God who cared for me all my life and rescued me from all my misfortunes, bless these two young boys here, as if they were my own sons carrying my name and the names of Abraham and Isaac. May they become a great people on this earth."

Jacob paused to catch his breath, at which point Joseph reached up and tried to lift Jacob's right hand off Ephraim's head and place it on Manasseh's head instead.

Jacob, however, kept his hands firmly where they were.

"But Dad," Joseph protested, "Manasseh is the firstborn so your right hand should be on his head, not Ephraim's."

"Don't worry, Joseph, I know what I'm doing," Jacob replied, "Manasseh will also become a great people one day but this young lad Ephraim will be even greater. Take heart, my boy, both

your sons will be great one day, so great in fact, that the best blessing people could wish on their friends is that God would bless them like Ephraim and Manasseh."

Joseph, however, was still a little doubtful, so Jacob grabbed his arm tightly and said, "Joseph, can you not see what's happening here? I'm going to die soon but God has chosen your children now to follow in the footsteps of his promise. God made that promise to Abraham and his descendants, remember? Well, Isaac became his first descendant, then I became the next in line, and now he's chosen you. God looks upon your two children as my firstborn sons, so his promise now continues through them. You realize what that also means, don't you? It means you'll be returning back to Canaan one day, because that was his promise, to give us the land of Canaan for ever. So, don't worry Joseph, everything's going to work out fine, because God's with you now, just like he was with me, making absolutely sure his promises come true."

Jacob then gathered all his other sons round the bed, to tell them what was going to happen to them and their descendants, some of it good, some of it bad, but the best was saved for Joseph's sons. God had chosen Joseph a long time ago to be a prince among his brothers, so to Joseph went all the promises of God's help when troubles came and his blessings in life now and for ever.

With a sigh, Jacob then announced his wish that they bury him in the same cave that Abraham had bought from Ephron the Hittite, where Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca and his own wife Leah were buried. He then lay back on the bed and quietly breathed his last.

Chapter 36 - The brothers apologize....

Jacob's death left Joseph heartbroken. He hugged and cried over his Dad for a long time. The entire land of Egypt went into a state of mourning, too, for seventy days.

Joseph then asked permission from Pharaoh if he could return to Canaan to bury his Dad in the family plot, according to his Dad's wishes. "Of course," Pharaoh replied, "you do exactly what your father wished for, and what you promised him, too."

So, just as God said he would, Joseph returned to Canaan. Riding with him in the funeral procession were all Pharaoh's top men and the most important men in Egypt, all in their chariots or on horseback, and all Jacob's family but the children, too.

It was an enormous company of people who made the long sad journey to a spot beside the river Jordan where they could contain their sorrow no longer. They were so loud in their crying that those who lived in the area actually named the place, 'How terribly sad the Egyptians are'.

Joseph's brothers were not just sad, though, they were also deeply worried because now that their father was no longer there to protect them, what would Joseph do to them now? Would he now exact revenge for all that they'd done to him?

But Jacob had thought of that, too, and he'd given the brothers a message for Joseph, which went like this:

"Joseph, your brothers hurt you, I know that. They did some terrible things to you, but I'm asking you to forgive them. Will you please do that for me?"

They sent Jacob's message to Joseph as soon as they could, along with a note of their own, begging for forgiveness, admitting how terribly wrong they'd been and apologizing profusely for everything they'd done. When Joseph read the message, he cried.

When the brothers finally got up the courage to go and see Joseph personally, they bowed low to the ground before him. Joseph immediately stood them on their feet and said, "You've got nothing to fear from me, my brothers, I'm not your God. Yes, you treated me badly, but God turned it all round to the good anyway. I mean, look at us, we're all safe and sound, aren't we? The past is past, so stop worrying. And as far as the future is concerned, I'll make sure you and your families are well looked after, so put your minds at rest."

Conclusion

Joseph was true to his word, and the family lived in Egypt very happily for the rest of their lives. Joseph lived to be a hundred and ten years old, long enough to see his great, great grandsons.

When it came time for Joseph to die, it was then his turn to reassure his brothers that God would not fail in his promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to give their descendants the land of Canaan for ever. He also made them promise to take him with them to Canaan when they returned so that he could be buried in their beloved homeland, too.

The saga continues in the book of ***Exodus*** where Israel becomes so powerful it scares a new Pharaoh into drastic action - with terrible consequences.