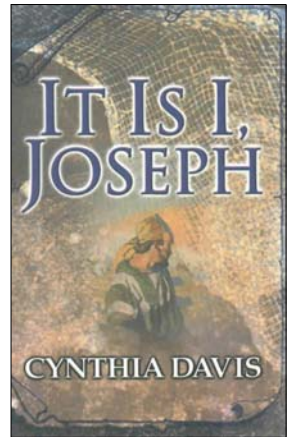


It is I, Joseph by Cynthia Davis

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Chapter 1

I was the special, the beloved, and the youngest son of sheik Jacob of Canaan. I grew up coddled by mother and father. Vaguely, I remember my grandfather Laban setting me on his knee in Haran and telling me that God planned great things for me.

“You will be greater than your brothers. Those born to the barren are doubly blessed by God.”

I was often reminded that my mother, Rachel, had been barren for ten long years before I was born. Even the birth of my baby brother, Benjamin, in Ephrath didn't diminish my status in my father's eyes. If anything, we grew closer through our shared grief. Rachel, his beloved wife and my mother, died. A five-year-old boy feels the loss of his mother deeply.

My father provided a tutor for me as soon as we settled in Hebron, because everyone believed that God had destined me for greater things than herding sheep.

“My son, you are an answer to prayer. You are the son of my first and only love, Rachel. Leah and Bilhah and Zilpah have given me many sons, it is true, but you are special to my heart.”

Hearing these words regularly from my father, I soon began to act as though I was better than my older brothers. In youthful arrogance, I never thought of their jealousy. Even when they tried to ignore me, I pranced before them, always eager to display some new favor of our father.

My seventeenth birthday dawned clear and bright. The tents nestled comfortably in the valley and were protected by the size of the camp and the prestige of Jacob. I awoke with great anticipation, expecting something extraordinary for this special day. I was not disappointed. My father called me to him early in the morning.

“My son, see what I have for you!”

Despite their pretended indifference, I could feel eleven pairs of eyes following me as I strutted over to my father. I took the neatly folded item from him. With a hug, he told me,

“Joseph, today you will begin to fulfill all that your mother and I have planned and dreamed for you!”

Curiously, I unfolded the gift. A wonderful and elaborately embroidered linen coat with long, flowing sleeves rippled in my hands. I ignored the collective gasp of outrage from my brothers. Joyfully, I hugged my father.

“This is the most wonderful gift. See my brothers! Is not Father kind and generous?”

Slipping into the coat, I whirled before my brothers. With an eye on father, they made the appropriate, but unenthusiastic, congratulations. The symbolism of the princely robe was not lost on me or the rest of the family.

“And that explains why I had the dreams I have had,” I thoughtlessly added fuel to their rage.

“What dreams?” Jacob asked when no one else responded.

Standing proudly in my grand, new coat before my brothers and the rest of the family, I explained, “I dreamed that we were all in the fields. All twelve of us.”

Looking around at my brothers, I saw that they were concentrating on finishing their meal. Undeterred, I continued, “The harvest was done and we were binding up the sheaves. Suddenly, the most amazing thing happened!”

Turning to look fully at all the brothers, I told them, “Your eleven sheaves *bowed* down to *mine*.”

With a proud toss of my head, I stood staring down at them. Their instantaneous reaction was one of anger.

Reuben, the oldest, jumped to his feet, “*You* think I would ever bow to you!”

“Nothing but a spoiled brat,” Judah snarled.

“Big dream for a little man,” big Gad sneered.

“My sons,” Jacob intervened before I could answer, “dreams can mean many things.”

“But wait, my father and brothers,” unable to drop the subject, I plunged on. “I had a second dream, like the first!”

“Really?” Simeon affected a yawn.

“Truly, listen!” I grabbed his arm. Roughly, he shook me off, but I careened on. “My second dream was of all our stars.”

“Our stars?” Levi was almost interested. In Haran, we all learned of our natal stars and the control they held over our lives.

Taking his response as encouragement, I continued, “Your eleven stars and the sun and moon all gathered around my star!”

Excitedly, I turned to my father. “Then they all bowed and made obeisance to my star!”

His anger surprised me.

“You think that not only your brothers, but your mother and I will bow to you?” Robes swirling, he stamped away.

Stunned, I could barely stammer, “It was only a dream.”

He made no response and my brothers mocked me as they left to take the sheep to a far pasture.

“Dreamer, dream again.”

“Not so special, are you?”

“Bow to you? Never!”

I wandered off to be by myself, away from the whispers and titters of the women. The dreams were vivid in my mind. I had no doubt that they foretold what God had planned for me.

“Everyone knows that when a dream comes twice, it is determined by God.” I told myself, reviewing again in my mind the picture of sheaves and stars bowing to me.

“My brothers, you *will* bow to me. God will fulfill what He has promised.” I muttered after the dust cloud that hid them on their way to Shechem.

Jacob and I never again mentioned my dreams. There was a reserve between us that had not been there before. I refused to apologize and so the tension grew. One day he called me to his side.

“Joseph, my son, go and see how your brothers are doing.”

“Yes, my father.”

“Your tutor can go with you.”

Seeing a way to be totally free and alone, I said, “No, Father, let him stay here. I can go more swiftly alone. You know that Ebrot is not happy traveling.”

It took some arguing, but finally Jacob agreed to let me go alone.

Wearing my grand coat, which I treasured all the more now that my father was cooler toward me, I set out. Striding briskly over the hills and through the wadis I arrived at Shechem.

My brothers, however, were not to be found in the fields.

“Who are you looking for, my lord?” a shepherd approached me.

Gratified that he believed me important, I replied. “I seek the sons of Jacob, sheik of Canaan.”

“They have gone on. I believe they went to Dothan.”

“Thank you, my man,” I replied grandly, as I tossed him a piece of silver.

“Generous lord, may you find those you seek,” he called after me with many a salaam.

Head high, I proudly strode off toward Dothan. Clearly, my God given status was obvious to all but my own family.

I spied the sheep and brothers camped in the valley near Dothan. Eagerly, I waved to them from the hilltop. They turned their backs to talk to each other. After scrambling carefully down the hill, I hurried toward them.

“My brothers, Father sends his greeting and blessing.”

“Why, look, brothers,” Simeon drawled, “it’s our little brother, the grand dreamer.”

“Father wanted to know how you are doing.” Oblivious to the undercurrent, I babbled on. “Are the you all and the herds doing well? I had to follow you from Shechem.”

The ominous lack of response finally made me fall silent. For the first time, I looked into their eyes. Hatred and jealousy were plainly seen. Taking a step back, I bumped into Naphali. He grabbed my arms, but not to steady me.

Encircled by my brothers, I felt fear for the first time. Angry hands ripped my coat, the precious gift from my father, off my back.

“Not so special now, away from Father!” Levi sneered in my face, his own face contorted with rage.

Their bottled up fury exploded into vicious beating and kicking. Helpless against so many, I fell to the ground, and futilely tried to protect my face from their blows. Only barely conscious, I heard Reuben say,

“Wait, let us not kill him. He is our brother. Throw him into the empty cistern there. Then our hands will not be stained with his blood.”

Rough hands dragged me across the ground. I felt myself lifted and then falling. The last of my consciousness left me as I crashed to the bottom of the pit. How long I lay in the mud I don't know.

Gradually, pain told me that I was alive. Dimly, I heard laughter. My brothers were celebrating my death. Horror washed over me.

With a groan, I reached out in the blackness. My hand felt the damp mud I lay in. Agonizingly slowly, I stretched further. Pain shot through me, but I managed to reach out. I felt the wall of the pit. By gradual, slow movements I was finally able to stand up. Leaning against the side of my prison, I gasped in pain. By looking straight up, I could see that it was night.

Sobbing in despair, I sank into the mud. My head pounded with the knowledge that my brothers, my own flesh and blood, had attacked me. They were going to leave me here to die. Aching in every joint, I bowed my head onto my knees.

“Where is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?” I cried into the blackness. “Why have You let this happen if You are so great? Am I not the son of the promise? Your promise? The dreams You sent? God, are You going to let me die here?”

The night was spent in hopeless rage against God. Eventually, a little light filtered down from above and I knew it was day. I could hear nothing. Had my brothers left already?

Painfully, I stood up. My head ached from the beating and from my lack of sleep. I could feel cuts and bruises all over my body. My throat was parched from lack of water. Panting from the exertion of dragging myself to my feet, I leaned against the wall of the well. Then I heard the jangle of harness and voices approaching. Hope glimmered in me.

“Help!” my voice was barely a whisper.

I tried again, “Help!”

It sounded louder to my ears. Desperately, I repeated my cry, wishing for a concerned face to appear over the rim of the cistern.

Instead, Issachar's angry voice called down to me, “Shut up, fool!” as his head blocked out the light.

“Brother, help,” I started to beg but he was gone. The murmur of voices went on for a long time but I couldn't make out the words. Suddenly the light was blotted out again. Judah called down.

“Are you still there? Tie this rope around your waist and we'll lift you out.”

Joy and hope surged through me. My brothers had repented and were rescuing me. Eagerly, with the strength of renewed trust, I grasped the rope and wrapped it around my waist, ignoring the jabs of pain in my body. Almost before I was ready, they began hauling me up. Unable to use my hands and feet to steady myself along the sides, I was swiftly and roughly, with many bangs against the stone lining of the well, brought to the surface and dragged over the edge. Blinking in the morning light, my swollen eyes squinted around. I rose to my knees and found myself looking into the impassive eyes of a huge man I did not know.

“So this is the merchandise?” His voice rumbled deep in his chest. Still not understanding, I turned my head, only to have his huge hairy hands grasp my chin and pry open my mouth.

Indignant, I struggled and raised a fist only to receive a kick in the ribs from Levi. Gasping for air, I fell forward when my jaw was released.

“Looks healthy,” the big man said to the anxiously waiting men. Then to me he said, “can you indeed read, write, and figure?”

A clay tablet was thrust at me. Struggling back to my knees, I stared wildly at my brothers, seeking some explanation.

Like wolves, they stared at me. Big Gad leaned over and hissed in my ear, “Do what he asks or it will be back in the pit.” The threat chilled my soul. His eyes told me that this was not a joke.

I took the tablet and at the big man’s directions, wrote out an order for grain—first in Sumerian and then in Egyptian.

“Now, figure the price for six omars.”

I wrote the sum and gave the clay pad back. My mind still did not comprehend what was happening. It was not until the trader pulled out a purse and began counting silver into Judah’s hands that I understood. I was being sold into slavery.

With an almost animal cry, I sprang to my feet. Anger caused me to forget my bruises.

“How dare you?” I charged into the midst of my brothers. Their faces were blank and stony as I frantically begged for help.

“Judah, how can you do this? We are brothers! Simeon, have you nothing to say? Levi, Naphali, how have I harmed you? Asher, Zebulun, will no one help me? Dan, will you not spare a thought for Father’s sorrow?”

No one responded and the trader laughed. Feeling much like a hunted animal, I darted a glance around. Where could I run? Seeing what I thought was an opening, I made a dash. The flick of a whip around my ankles brought me to my knees. Swift, strong hands bound my hands behind me. A rope around my waist was tied to the camel saddle.

A quick command and the caravan moved off. I was forced to run behind or be dragged. My final sight of my brothers was the circle they formed to divide the coins they got from selling me. The rest of the day became a blur of heat and thirst, stones and stumbling, curses and blows. Evening saw us camping near a pool of water halfway to Migdal after trekking down the dry wadi from the fields of Dothan.

Hands still bound, I was untied from the camel and led to the water. Gratefully, I plunged my face into the murky water, gulping it in great swallows. A strong hand gripped my shoulder and pulled me back.

“Don’t let him drink too much at first. He will be sick.”

“Yes, Father,” the boy who held my rope replied. He was a sturdy lad and only a little younger than me.

Too exhausted to even argue, I sat on the sand with my head lowered. The boy squatted nearby watching me as if I was some exotic beast.

Eventually, the big man came back and untied my hands. The muscles complained as I straightened my arms. The trader handed me a chunk of bread. It was dry and hard, but it was the first food I had seen in over a day. Ravenously, I gnawed at it.

“Go on to the fire, lad, and get your meal,” he told his son.

“Boy,” I realized he was addressing me. “You will find me not a harsh master—if you do as I say. Your brothers tell me that they beat you for disobedience.”

I threw up my head in denial. His upraised hand silenced my angry response.

“Whether that is true or not, I don’t care. Normally, I do not even trade in slaves. But I know a man in Egypt who is seeking a scribe. If you can learn humility and obedience, you could serve him well. You seem young and smart. It is up to you, Boy. I will be watching.”

With this combined threat and promise, the man stood up and relinquished my rope to his son.

“Let him wash off some of the blood and dust before tying him up for the night.” The man gestured toward the camel line.

It felt good to splash the water, dirty though it was, over my body. The grit stung my cuts, but in the end I felt better. Wearily, I followed my keeper back through the camp, barely seeing the stares of the other traders. Carefully, the boy tied me between two camels. Exhaustion of body and soul claimed me and I slept.

The next day, I learned that Borz was the trader's name. His son, my guard, was Abdul. Plodding behind Abdul's camel, I had plenty of time to rage inwardly at God and my brothers.

Sullenly, I followed Abdul's camel day after day. There was no point in trying to escape. I did not know where I was, except that the Great Sea lay to the West and the mountains of my home were fast receding to the North and East. My cuts and bruises were healing, but the deeper hurt to my heart grew larger as I again and again relived my brothers' treachery.

Sitting alone one night, I stared up at the stars.

"God of my Fathers, why did you desert me? You let me be sold to slavers, bound like an animal. You allowed my brothers to beat and betray me. God, are You even there? Do You even care?"

That night I resolved to work out my own redemption. Shaking a fist at heaven, I swore, "You may have visited Abraham and Isaac and my father Jacob. But You have turned your back on me. Since You will not save me, I will save myself."

The next morning, rather than silently stalking beside Abdul, I engaged him in conversation. He was not much younger than me and lonely amid all the grown men in the group. It was his first time to travel with the trade caravan. I learned that their main trade items were the spices, balm, and nuts from further east. In return, I told him of the many flocks and herds of my father Jacob.

Borz was at first suspicious of my changed attitude. But when I did not try an escape, he relaxed and even let me teach Abdul some letters and numbers each evening by the firelight.

During the days that followed, I was allowed to have free run of the camp and was no longer tied between the camels at night. When the men learned that I could tell stories, they encouraged me to entertain them in the cool evenings. I know they thought that I was making up the anecdotes. All I had to do was remember the tales Jacob told of his time in Haran. I told them how God made his flocks flourish no matter what Laban did. One night I told of the wonderful coat my father gave me and the dreams I had.

“You are a great storyteller,” Abdul told me the next day as we walked through the sand. The Sea now lay to the North and I was told that the Wilderness of Shur lay to the South.

“I don’t believe half of what you say, but you have a way of spinning a tale! I’ll bet you could entertain Pharaoh himself. Father says we will be in Egypt in a week,” he continued.

The thought was sobering. I was reminded again that I was not a free man two days later when Borz informed us that we were crossing into Egypt.

“Our first stop will be Succoth. They are always anxious for the spices we bring.” I overheard the trader telling his son, “Then I will journey South to On for that is where Captain General Potiphar lives.”

“Father, why can’t Joseph stay with me, as my slave and tutor?” Abdul tried to plead with Borz.

“You knew from the start that I purchased the boy only to please my lord Potiphar, Captain General of Pharaoh’s army.”

“But he is not a slave. He should not have been sold by his brothers.” The boy was near tears on my behalf.

“Younger sons have been sold before this and will be again. My son, I know it seems harsh, and I am sorry that you became friends. You know I rarely deal in slaves and only did it this time as a favor.”

Abdul was no longer listening. He ran away. I found him behind a palm tree angrily beating his fist against the trunk.

“Thank you.” The simple words made him stop and look at me questioningly.

“I heard you talking to your father,” my explanation made his brows draw together.

“He is so unreasonable!” the boy exclaimed angrily. “I know...we can run away together!”

For a brief moment, I considered the option, then common sense reasserted itself.

“We would be found in a day,” I pointed out. “We hardly look Egyptian and our accent would betray us the first time one of us spoke.”

“Do you want to be sold? Don’t you want to be free?” his frustration turned to anger at me.

“More than anything!” I replied, knowing it was true and that I was probably a fool for throwing away this chance. “But you would be beaten and I would be sold to the galleys, and from there, there is no return.”

“You are a coward! And a fool!” Turning his back on me, Abdul strode back to camp. I followed sadly, knowing I had lost a friend.

That night, I slept restlessly, only to be roused by a sandal clad foot in my ribs. Abdul stood over me, once again the slave guard of our first meeting.

“We will reach Succoth today where I will be rid of you,” he informed me, his snarl covering up the tears that threatened.

Abdul refused to speak to me during the final day of desert travel. Silently, he rode while I plodded behind. I mourned that our friendship ended in such a way.

I had no idea what to expect, but my first sight of an Egyptian town astonished me. There were few towns in Canaan, but all were built of mud brick, squatting against hillsides or cowering in the valleys. Here was a city rising out of the grasslands of the Nile delta. It was hard to believe that it was built of mud brick, too. Many houses were two stories and covered with some kind of whitewash that reflected the orange and crimson colors of the setting sun. The official buildings and temples were ornamented with dramatic paintings of life in Egypt. I know my mouth was open as we wove our way through the city. Borz was well known to the city officials who came to welcome the caravan. We camped in the fields belonging to the local royal counselor.

Early the next day, the traders set up their booths, adding their shouts to the din in the marketplace. Borz put me to work keeping track of the sales. Pride compelled me to do a good job, although I knew that this was his final test of me before our journey to his friend Potiphar.

Next morning, we left behind the rest of the caravan. Borz woke me before it was light.

“Come, Boy. It is time to set out for On.”

From Succoth we traveled straight West to the Nile and then boarded a boat bound for On. As the wind and boatsmen’s poles moved us rapidly upstream, I stared in wonder at the rich, narrow river valley. Fields lined both sides of the river. The green of the crops contrasted with the golden sand stretching to the horizon in both directions, just beyond the reach of the Nile’s water. Further on, we saw some of the great Pyramids built, Borz told me, to hold the bodies of the Pharaoh’s for the afterlife. On itself was an amazing sight. The temples on the

West bank were dedicated to many different gods. I stared at the representations of the many gods depicted on the pylons and walls of the temples. Borz told me that the city of On was the home of Ra, the sun god of Egypt. Everywhere I looked, there were gold tipped obelisks to reflect the sunlight and statues of Ra with the sun disk on his head. The pillared limestone halls were awe inspiring for their sheer size and the grandeur of the carvings and murals I glimpsed.

When we were almost to On, Borz pointed to an estate gleaming in the sunlight.

“That is the home of Captain General Potiphar,” he told me.