

## Lesson 11 – Did Joseph’s Coat Have “Many Colors”?

### Background

#### Genesis 37:3 (ESV)

<sup>3</sup> Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of *many colors*.

#### Genesis 37:3 (NIV84)

<sup>3</sup> Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a *richly ornamented* robe for him.

#### Genesis 37:3 (NRSV)

<sup>3</sup> Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a *long robe with sleeves*.

### Why is This Unsolved?

The idea of Joseph’s special coat having “many colors” is so ingrained into religious culture that most people are likely unaware that the true nature of his tunic is a mystery. The reason for this mystery is rooted in two Hebrew words, *kethonet passim* (כֶּתוֹנֶת פַּסִּים) found in Genesis 37:3. These words are translated as “coat of many colours” in the KJV, and other English translations. However, the true meaning of *kethonet passim* is uncertain, and continues to be fiercely debated among Hebrew scholars. The origin of the “many colors” translation can be tied back to the Septuagint (Greek) translation of the Old Testament from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. This rendering was first carried over to the Latin Vulgate (4<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) and then adopted by the King James Version in 1611.

### Survey of English Translations of “*kethonet passim*” in Genesis 37:3

The uncertainty of the precise meaning of *kethonet passim* can be seen in the wide variety of renderings in our English translations available today:

KJV, NKJV, ASV, ESV: “coat [robe, tunic] of many colors [colours]”

NASB: “varicolored tunic”

NIV1984: “richly ornamented robe”

NIV2010: “ornate robe”

NET: “special tunic”

NLT: “beautiful robe”

RSV, NRSV: “long robe with sleeves”

NCV, GW: “special robe with long sleeves”

## Other Uses of *kethonet passīm* in the Old Testament

Note how in a single translation (ESV), these two words are translated differently in the story of Joseph (son of Jacob) versus the story of Tamar (daughter of King David). What could possibly explain the differences?

### Genesis 37:23 (ESV)

<sup>23</sup> So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the **robe of many colors** that he wore.

### Genesis 37:32 (ESV)

<sup>32</sup> And they sent the **robe of many colors** and brought it to their father and said, “This we have found; please identify whether it is your son’s robe or not.”

### 2 Samuel 13:18–19 (ESV)

<sup>18</sup> Now she [Tamar] was wearing a **long robe with sleeves**, for thus were the virgin daughters of the king dressed. So his servant put her out and bolted the door after her. <sup>19</sup> And Tamar put ashes on her head and tore the **long robe** that she wore. And she laid her hand on her head and went away, crying aloud as she went.

## Possible Meanings of “*kethonet passīm*”

**Mesopotamian Literature** – Cuneiform writings, discovered in ancient Mesopotamia, reveal a garment called *kitû pišannu*. Some scholars believe this directly corresponds to the Hebrew phrase *kethonet passīm*. The *kitû pišannu* is described as a ceremonial robe that could be draped around statues of goddesses and was adorned by gold ornaments. English translations of the Bible such as the NIV1984 followed this interpretation in their rendering of “ornamented robe”.

**Jewish Tradition** – According to Jewish tradition, the Hebrew word “pas” (פס), which is the root of “passīm”, is understood to mean the palm of the hand. English translations of the Bible such as the RSV, NRSV, NCV, and GW follow this tradition in their rendering of “long...sleeves”.

**Royal Garment** – Because 2 Samuel 18 identifies a *kethonet passīm* as being the garment worn by the virgin daughter of King David, many take this to mean it was an article of clothing associated with royalty.

## What Really Matters

*Regardless of exactly what Joseph’s coat looked like, we know it was special and unique. This was born out of his preferred status among Jacob’s sons (Gen 37:3). This distinction ultimately led to Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers, which in turn led to Joseph being used as God’s chosen instrument to save the children of Israel from starvation with the approaching famine.*

## Lesson Notes...

**4189** כְּתוֹנֶת (kūt·tō·nēt): n.fem.; ≡ Str 3801; TWOT 1058a—**1.** LN 6.152–6.187 **tunic**, garment, i.e., clothing as a covering more complete than a loincloth, a basic garment reaching the knees and so a common garment for common wear and work (Ge 3:21; SS 5:3); **2.** LN 6.152–6.187 unit: כְּתוֹנֶת פָּס (kūt·tō·nēt pās) special tunic, i.e., long robe with long sleeves, with a special focus that this garment is not “work clothing” (Ge 37:3, 23b, 32a; 2Sa 13:18, 19+), note: good argument can be given that tunic was special because it was a richly ornamented robe<sup>1</sup>

**3801.** כְּתוֹנֶת kethoneth or

כְּתוֹנֶת kuttoneth (509a); from an unused word; *a tunic*:—coat(2), dress(1), garment(2), garments(4), tunic(14), tunics(6).<sup>2</sup>

**7168** פֶּס (pās): n.[masc.]; ≡ Str 6446; TWOT 1789a—**1.** LN 8.9–8.69 **palm**, sole, i.e., the flat, under-surface part at the very end of the limbs of the human body (Ge 37:3, 23, 32; 2Sa 13:18, 19+), note: other sources relate this to variegation as a color pattern, also similarly a gold threaded ornamentation pattern, see also domain LN 79.26–79.38; also part of a compound name, *Pas Dammim*, see 7169; **2.** LN 6.152–6.187 unit: כְּתוֹנֶת פָּס (kūt·tō·nēt pās) special tunic, distinctive robe, i.e., a tunic or robe unique in design for showing special favor or relationship (Ge 37:3, 23, 32; 2Sa 13:18, 19+), note: either the robe was very long-sleeved and extending to the feet, or a richly-ornamented tunic either of special color design or gold threading, both ornamental and not suitable for working<sup>3</sup>

**6446.** פֶּס pas (821a); from an unused word; *flat* (of the hand or foot):—long-sleeved(2), varicolored(3).<sup>4</sup>

## Good Article on this Mystery:

<https://claudemariottini.com/2014/07/01/josephs-coat-of-many-colors/>

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<sup>1</sup> Swanson, J. (1997). In [Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains : Hebrew \(Old Testament\)](#) (electronic ed.). Logos Research Systems, Inc.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas, R. L. (1998). In [New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek dictionaries : updated edition](#). Foundation Publications, Inc.

<sup>3</sup> Swanson, J. (1997). In [Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains : Hebrew \(Old Testament\)](#) (electronic ed.). Logos Research Systems, Inc.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas, R. L. (1998). In [New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek dictionaries : updated edition](#). Foundation Publications, Inc.

### Commentaries on Genesis 37:3

**a robe with long sleeves** The meaning of the Hebrew phrase used here, *kethoneth passim*, is uncertain. It also appears in 2 Sam 13:18–19, but without any description. While it is clear that Joseph’s robe set him apart from his brothers—likely indicating his favored status—it is not clear what set it apart. It could have had long sleeves, been made of expensive material, or been a robe of many colors. The idea that the robe had many colors derives from the way the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the OT) translates *kethoneth passim*. Regardless of its appearance, the robe distinguishes Joseph from his brothers and possibly indicates a position of authority over them.<sup>5</sup>

**3** The meaning of כְּתוֹנֶת פַּסִּים (*kethonet passim*; NIV, “richly ornamented robe”) is “a coat of extended length,” literally, a coat that extends to the hands and feet (*passim*). The idea of a “coat of many colors” comes from the early versions: LXX (χιτώνα ποικίλον, *chitona poikilon*), Palestinian Targum (פָּרְגוֹד מְצוּיָר) [*pargod mesuyayr*, “many colored coat” (J. Levy, *Chaldaisches Worterbuch uber die Targumim* [Leipzig: Baumgaertner’s Buchhandlung, 1881], p. 286)], Vulgate (*tunicam polymitam*). The only other occurrence of the term is 2 Sam 13:18–19, where it refers to the “kind of garment the virgin daughters of the king wore.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Barry, J. D., Mangum, D., Brown, D. R., Heiser, M. S., Custis, M., Ritzema, E., Whitehead, M. M., Grigoni, M. R., & Bomar, D. (2012, 2016). [Faithlife Study Bible](#) (Ge 37:3). Lexham Press.

<sup>6</sup> Sailhamer, J. H. (1990). [Genesis](#). In F. E. Gaebelein (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers* (Vol. 2, p. 227). Zondervan Publishing House.