

THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM – PART VIII -SECTION I

THE TRIALS OF JOSEPH AND

THE BEGINNING OF THE CONVERSION OF JUDAH

I. After the book deals describes how Esau will be the founder of a great people, the book returns to the situation with Jacob and his sons, where conflicts arise between Jacob's favorite son and his brothers.

A. The account opens probably a little after the attack on Dinah and the destruction of the people of Shechem, sometime before Jacob's death.

1. The episode opens with Joseph at 17, tending sheep with his brothers, or even tending his brothers, with authority over them. It is not clear whether this authority began shortly before or after the attack on Dinah, but it sets up the scene for the episode in which Joseph is sold into slavery.

2. His role was as an assistant to the four sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher. The six sons of Leah were presumably with other flocks. Joseph is supposed to be the assistant, but it seems that he is asserting more authority.

- Except Joseph, the text refers to the young men not by name, but rather by their mothers. It seems that Judah thought of his sons mostly in accord with whose mother they were.

- Now that Rachel is dead, Bilhah and Zilpah seem to have acquired the status of wives. All of them are equal, except the beloved deceased Rachel.

3. The troubles compound as Joseph brought bad reports to Jacob about his brothers. It is not clear whether these reports are entirely accurate.

B. Unfortunately, Jacob shows favor to Joseph, either because of his charismatic personality and/or because he is the only grown son of the beloved Rachel.

1. Benjamin, who will be favored later, was probably newborn or perhaps not even born yet when Joseph is first loved more by Jacob.
2. The fact that Joseph is later revealed (or becomes) much more virtuous than his brothers does not justify this early favoritism, which like the favoritism of Esau over Jacob by Isaac (and reverse by Rebekah) and like all such favoritism will cause problems, both jealousy and pride. See St. Ambrose, On Joseph 2:5-6 (although also arguing that, because of his virtue, Jacob had the legal right to give such a preference.)
3. The multi-colored tunic (or robe) that Jacob gave Joseph was probably a sign of authority. Jacob was making Joseph the heir apparent. Some of the Church Fathers considered Joseph to be a prefigurement of Christ and the tunic to be a figure of the many-fold gifts of the Spirit won through Christ. See St. Caesarius of Arles, Sermon 93.

C. Joseph then recounts two dreams that indicate his authority over his brothers and in fact arguably over all of creation.

1. He tells the first dream only to his brothers. That dream involved sheaves of grain, with his sheaf towering over the others and receiving obedience from them. The imagery seems more from an agricultural society such as Egypt, rather than a more shepherding society such as Israel. It may be that Egyptian influences were already coming into his thoughts.
 - The brothers sense immediately the implication and are resentful of it. Ironically, he has united them, but here in their opposition to them
2. Joseph tells about his second dream to his brothers and then to his father. That dream is more cosmic, with the brothers represented by stars and himself by the sun. It is an extraordinary image, for the pagans considered these cosmic figures to be the symbols of the highest gods, or even the gods themselves. See Wis. 13:1-2. The Egyptians' highest god Ra, is the god of the sun.
 - The text passes over the brothers' reaction; it was presumably negative.

- When Joseph tells Jacob about the dream, Jacob reproves him, but also ponders the matter. Jacob may well have believed that the dream was from God, but he may also be worried that Joseph is antagonizing his brothers.
3. The text does not make it clear whether this dream is from God or from Joseph's own desires. God does sometimes speak to people in dreams. See, e.g., Gen. 20:3-7, 31:10-13, 41:1-7; 1 Kings 3:1-15; Job 33:15-18; Dan. 2:27-45; Matt. 1:20. But the Bible also warns that people can easily delude themselves by their dreams, pretending that they are messages from God, when in fact they are only messages from their own fears or desires. See Jer. 23:25-32, 27:9-10, 29:8; Sir. 34:1-7.
 - One's interpretation of these dreams makes a critical difference. If one reads them as from God, Joseph is the rightful and innocent, although somewhat ham-handed leader. If they are partially his own creation, he is grasping for power not yet rightfully his; under that interpretation, Joseph's persecution, although unjust, is also a teaching moment. The Church Fathers tend to favor the former interpretation. See, e.g., St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Genesis 41; St. Caesarius of Arles, Sermon 89. Many modern commentators favor the latter view. See Leon Kaas, The Beginning of Wisdom 516.

II. The conflict between the brothers comes to a crisis as Joseph is sent to assert authority over his brothers, and his brothers turn and sell him into slavery.

A. Sometime after these events, Jacob's father takes an enormous risk and sends Joseph out to check on them and their management of the flocks.

1. Overtly, the mission is simply to report back to Jacob. However, subtly there is a clear mission to assert power.

2. Jacob refers to "our" flocks, when they are in fact his. The fact that Joseph is now home with Jacob indicates that he has an advisory role. And the adjectival pronoun "we" indicates that the flocks are partially at least his.

3. The location is a dangerous one, for it is now wilderness, but it was the city whose inhabitants were slaughtered by these brothers. Jacob knows this fact and thus knows the danger he is sending Joseph into. He may be testing Joseph's dreams. For there is an eerie connection to the testing of Abraham by the call to sacrifice of Isaac. Here, as there, the command begins with the words, "Go, please"; and the response is "Here I am."

4. Some of the Church Fathers saw a connection between the Father sending His Son to bring back the fallen race, who would betray the son. See, e.g., St. Ambrose, On Joseph 3:9; St. John Chrysostom, Homilies On Genesis 61:10.

B. At first, the conflict is averted as a mysterious man tells Joseph that the brothers have gone on elsewhere, to Dothan. The man may have been an angel, giving Joseph a last opportunity to relent, or perhaps guiding the impending betrayal to a place where Joseph would be sold, rather than killed. The hand of God may have subtly been at work here, not by preventing disaster, for God would not stop human freedom, but rather by causing it to work for His purposes all the same. See Gary Rendsburg, The Great Courses: The Book of Genesis Vol. II 133. The hand of God is frequently at work in the most mysterious ways, as Joseph will later realize. See Gen. 50:10.

C. But then, as Joseph approaches his brothers, they are filled with envy and, in a move that anticipates future inheritance battles in salvation and secular history, conspire to kill him and dispose of the body. See, e.g., Judges 9; 1 Kings 1.

- While such violence is today not as common (although it exists) disputes over inheritance can be among the ugliest. It is more than ironic that, precisely when people are the most privileged, as Jacob's sons were regardless of who ruled, ambition and envy can be the greatest.

- D. Reuben steps in and, as the eldest brother, plays a half-role in defending justice. He proposes that they let Joseph die in a well, rather than shedding his blood, intending to deliver Joseph later.
1. Reuben intends to deliver Joseph back to Jacob, perhaps thereby getting back in Jacob's good favor after the affair with Bilhah. He does not seem to realize that that solution does not solve anything. For, unless Jacob drives away the other nine brothers, the envy and murderous impulses would remain, now with nine against two.
 2. The proposal is also bizarre, for killing someone by letting him thirst and starve to death in a well would be worse than killing him outright. But logic is no part of this sort of calculus.
 3. The proposal does at least gain a stay of execution. During the subsequent meal, they may have been discussing plans for the future or working out a common story.
- E. Then some Ishmaelites come by, and Judah, who will become the ruler of the brothers, proposes another plan, one that will save Joseph.
1. He proposes selling Joseph as a slave for two reasons: (1) it will gain them profit; and (2) it would be somewhat more humane, or at least less grossly inhumane. They may not have realized the danger that he could somehow get back to Jacob and thus given away the message.
 2. They sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver. Jesus would later be sold for thirty pieces of silver, the price also listed by Zechariah as the value that the people put on prophecy. See Zech. 11:12; Matt. 26:15.
- F. Some Midianites also come by and they get Joseph instead.
1. It is not clear whether the Ishmaelites sold Joseph to the Midianites, whether the Midianites got Joseph first, or whether they were different names given to the same group (perhaps one of mixed origin.)

2. If the first or third case is accurate, then Reuben presumably was not there when this sale was occurring; and thus, when he returned, he assumed that Joseph had been taken. If it is the second case, then Reuben was going to bring Joseph to the Ishmaelites, but Midianites had gotten him first, and neither Reuben nor his brothers know what happened.

G. In any case, the brothers claim they found the bloody tunic of Joseph and send it to Jacob. They do not come to him in person immediately, probably because of shame or fear he will ask too many questions.

H. Jacob's response may indicate he believed their message, but may also be accusatory. For the term "a wild beast" elsewhere in Scripture indicates human beings. See, e.g., Lev. 26:6; Ez. 34:22-25; see Ps. 124:6-7.

III. In a surprise move, the text then turns in chapter 38 to the saga of Judah during the time when Joseph is in Egypt.

A. Judah will become the tribe from which the Davidic line of kings comes, and so it is important to describe how the patriarch of this tribe, as flawed as he is, comes to be selected.

B. Judah, the fourth of Leah's sons, has already begun to take a leadership role in proposing the sale of Jacob. Now he leaves the family for a time and, over the course of about twenty or twenty-five years, grows from being powerful but undisciplined to becoming a more repentant and responsible person. Later on in the narrative of Joseph, it will be clear that he is in the leadership position. See Gen. 43:2-10, 44:14-34, 49:9-12.

C. Judah, perhaps ashamed and perhaps disgusted by the events surrounding Joseph, leaves for another land, although one not far away. He then marries a Canaanite woman, perhaps the first marriage among the sons of Jacob. And with her he has three children: Er, Onan and Shelah. On the one hand, the marriage to a pagan is very problematic; on the other hand it is not clear what else Judah is to do.

D. The drama then develops as Judah arranges for Er to marry one Tamar. However, because of Er's sinfulness, the Lord slaughters him. It is not clear what that sin was, but it may have been a sexual one as with Onan later. In any case, God expects holiness from His people, whether they think so or not. The text does not explain why God slaughters Er (and later Onan) for their sins, but not Joseph's brothers. God in His Providence sometimes imposes immediate punishment, and sometimes defers it. One can never tell, and no one should be presumptuous.

E. Judah then tells Onan to take Tamar as a sort of wife on his brother's behalf to raise up children from Er. Later, the levirate law would call for such a marriage. See Duet. 25:5-10. Other societies of the area would do so, for it is essential to maintaining the stability of land ownership through families, and thus to avoid the few acquiring larger and larger estates. Among the Jewish people, the policy of keeping land within the family was supposed to be maintain through the law that property had to be returned to the family that originally owned in the Jubilee Year, which occurred every 50 years. See Lev. 25; Kaas, The Beginning of Wisdom 631. This attempt frequently failed in practice. See, e.g., 1 Kings 21:1-16; Is. 3:13-15, 5:8. Nevertheless, the levirate law was still in principle in effect during Jesus' life, and it let to the Sadducee's question about how the resurrection would work with a woman who married seven brothers in succession. See Matt. 22:23-33; Mk. 12:18-27.

- The law may also have been intended to prevent family violence. For it was applicable only when property was held in common. In such a case, there may be the desire to murder a brother, or at least not protect him, for if a brother died, the remaining brothers would inherit more of the property. However, if one of the brothers must raise children for the deceased brother, that incentive would no longer exist.

F. At this point, there was no requirement that the next son take his brother's widow to raise up descendants for his brother. It is here simply a command (or request) of Judah. However, Onan pretends to obey it.

G. At this point, Onan uses a primitive method of contraception to avoid having children for his brother. The reluctance is puzzling, for these children would pose no threat to him; and it is likely that he would not have to spend much time raising them. It may be that he disliked Er and/or wanted to be the firstborn.

H. In any case, God strikes Onan down as well for this sin against purity. The sin was not simply that he refused to have children for his brother. For, even when the levirate law came into effect about 400 years later, the punishment for refusing the marriage was not death, but a sort of public shaming. See Duet. 25:7-10. The sin was instead that he had relations with her but refused to be open to children. Such a refusal to be open to children would become almost unknown among the Chosen People, for children were highly prized. However, before and during the time of Christ and the early Church, such practices were common among the Roman pagans and condemned by the Church. See, e.g., St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica II-II, qu. 154. art. 1, 11; Pope Paul VI, Humanae Vitae (1968) 11, 14; see also Gal. 5:19-21; Didache ch. 2 (both using the term pharimakos for one of the pagan practices that Christians must avoid.)

IV. The dealings between Judah and Tamar reflect Judah's initial irresponsibility, but also the beginning of his conversion

A. Judah then promises Tamar that his third son will marry her. However, not knowing why the first two sons died, but suspecting some connection to Tamar, he refuses to bring about the marriage. He may have intended a permanent refusal, or he may have simply been delaying a decision. In any case, he is unjust for his refusal to keep his promise, which led Tamar to stay in her father's house as a widow, not seeking another husband.

B. When Judah's wife has died and Judah himself is travelling with a friend, Tamar decides to take matters into her own hands. She engages in a move that is both daring and bizarre and dresses up as a temple prostitute to seduce Judah.

- The temple prostitutes brought sexuality into pagan ritual practice to form a sort of fertility cult. This perversion of worship was not uncommon in the pagan world and would become a constant temptation for the Israelites. See, e.g., Duet 23:18; 1 Kings 14:24, 15:12, 22:47; 2 Kings 23:7.

C. In the wake of his wife's death, Judah, with a rather unhelpful friend, goes to a city that he is obviously not particularly familiar with. Upon seeing what looks like a temple prostitute, he goes in with her.

- Judah's behavior seems callous in the extreme, given his wife's recent death. However, even people who are truly

grieved at death sometimes engage in reckless behavior to forget their grief and seek comfort from anyone who can offer it. Here as elsewhere, death can be the opportunity of holiness or sin.

D. Knowing Judah well, Tamar plays into his recklessness, demanding his signs of authority, his seal (hung from a cord) and his staff as a pledge for payment. The fact that Judah gives up such important signs of his authority indicates that he is reckless, either temporarily or perhaps as a matter of habit. Once again, his friend is particularly useless.

- When he tries to redeem the pledge he cannot, and only then learns that the town is more moral than he thought, having no temple prostitutes. Probably embarrassed at his foolishness, he does not pursue the matter. But the truth will find a way out.

E. As she intended, Tamar becomes pregnant. Because she is technically still betrothed to Shelah, the affair would be called adultery. Judah angrily responds by demanding her execution, which was apparently then, as later in Jewish history, the penalty for adultery.

- His reaction is, of course, totally hypocritical, both because of his own behavior and because he has refused to hold the very marriage between Shelah and Tamar that gives him an interest in her. However, the world is frequently hypocritical: in looking down on impure women, but not on impure men; in condoning licentiousness, but then being shocked at the unwed pregnancies that result; and in being both relativistic when it comes to sexual ethics, but still very fascinated by affairs.

F. Tamar then brings forth the proof that she has been carefully guarding all along. Legally, it does not excuse her conduct, but it does show the guilt of Judah in his behavior and reminds him and everyone of his injustice in withholding Shelah.

G. Judah finally repents of his behavior and injustice, being honest with himself and others and finding Tamar at least more in the right than he.

- He may also have been stung by the fact that she uses very similar words in proving his guilt in this matter to those that the brothers used in presenting Joseph's coat in order to "prove" his death.

- H. The account ends with the birth of twins, which is both a blessing and a reminder that the struggles between Jacob and Esau will be a prefigurement of struggles to come. However, in this case, both brothers, and all of the grandchildren of Jacob, will find a place in the kingdom.
- The focus on the arbitrariness of determining which one of the brothers was born first may be a mockery of the whole focus in the world on who is the firstborn, rather than who is the most virtuous or capable of leading.