

THE PEOPLE OF GOD MOVE TO EGYPT

I. In Chapter 44, Joseph tests his brothers and Judah rises to be the just leader of them.

A. Joseph sets up the test by having his servant place his divination chalice into Benjamin's bag, catch up to the brothers and then accuse Benjamin him of stealing it when it is found upon him.

1. The entire episode makes Joseph look clever, but very willing to use deceit. It should be noted that there is no particular evidence that God commanded this deceit, any more than was the case when Abraham and then Isaac passed off their wives as sisters. It is also not clear whether Joseph intended this test all along, or whether he is trying to figure out a way to keep his brothers near and reveal his identity.

2. Whatever the explanation, the test creates a terrible situation, both for the falsely accused Benjamin (whom we do not hear from) and for his brothers. They must decide whether to stay with their brother or not, and whether to act to save him for the sake of their honor and their father's future.

3. The situation is the reverse of Laban's allegation that Jacob took his household gods. In that case, the beloved one, Rachel, was in fact guilty but not caught; here the beloved Benjamin is innocent but appears guilty.

4. Joseph says that the chalice was used for divination. At this point, there is no comment on the morality of using such divination, or even whether Joseph really used it for this purpose. Later Jewish, and by extension Christian, morals would plainly forbid trying to gain knowledge in spiritual ways that do not involve prayer and faith in the true God. See, e.g., Lev. 19:31, 20:6; Duet. 18:10-11; Gal. 5:20; 1 Pet. 4:3; Rev. 22:15. For prophesy is never gained by man's willing it. 2 Pet. 1:20-21.

B. When the servant does stop them, the brothers are absolutely convinced of their collective innocence, to the point where they propose death to any guilty party and enslavement for the rest if any of them stole the chalice.

1. It does speak well of their mutual trust that they could make such an offer. They have been acting together, and do not

even consider the possibility that Benjamin is guilty, either because he is so known for his honesty, or because they still think of him as incapable of planning. On the negative side, the offer indicates that they are not thinking through the situation well; after all, not only could one of them be guilty, but the chalice might mysteriously appear as the money did on the earlier trip.

2. The servant acts like an utterly just and merciful judge, only wanting to punish the guilty, and then proportionately to the crime.

C. When the chalice is discovered with Benjamin's baggage, the brothers face their first test, which they pass by staying with him.

1. When the servant discovers the chalice with Benjamin, the other brothers could have assumed he was guilty and abandoned him, providing for their own safety, and thus for the continuation of the house of Israel.

2. However, they stay with him, for one or more of several reasons: (1) a genuine love for him; (2) a sense of loyalty to Israel and desire not to bring grief to him; (3) a sense of shame for having failed to protect Benjamin and perhaps memory of their injustice to Joseph; (4) the desire not to allow dishonor to fall on the family; or (5) a belief that Benjamin could not be guilty.

3. This loyalty, even when not clearly required by moral law, begins to make up for the injustice to Joseph and reveals them to be better than there had been. They are becoming the united people of God that will prepare the way for the Messiah and be a prefiguration of the Church, rejoicing and suffering together. As with the lost sheep, they do not wish to leave anyone behind.

D. When they return to Joseph's house, Judah is plainly in the lead. His response is very loyal and courageous, albeit not particularly rational.

1. As soon as they all return, Joseph must perceive that they have already passed the first test and remained with Benjamin. He is probably very glad about it, but must continue the ruse to complete the test.

2. Judah is plainly leading the brothers and offers that they will all be slaves together with Benjamin. The fact that he can make this offer shows his authority.
 - a. The offer does not particularly make sense, as Joseph points out, but one cannot expect everyone to be acting entirely rationally under the circumstances.
 - b. It is also possible that Judah does not think that Joseph will take him up on the offer, but rather hopes that he will spread a lesser punishment on all of them.

3. Judah's leadership unites them (e.g., they come together as one), as the king will later unite God's people. The leadership is offer in the form of sacrifice, as befitting for a king.

4. Joseph rejects Judah's offer as unjust, as it would be had Benjamin really been the guilty party. It is not clear whether: (1) Joseph is testing Judah to see if he will take the next step and offer himself; or (2) whether Joseph intended to keep Benjamin with him and reveal himself first to Benjamin, who would then presumably take the message to all the others. Joseph may have been planning on the second option to secure Benjamin more for himself. It is also possible that Joseph does not have a clear plan in mind. Whatever Joseph's intention, he gives the other brothers a clear opportunity to avoid any consequence and return home in safety.

E. However, Judah takes over the situation with his heroic and noble offer of himself in place of Benjamin.

1. Here, Judah gives the longest speech in the book of Genesis, lasting 17 verses. Unlike pagan mythologies, Biblical accounts do not typically have lengthy speeches. The speech here shows all the courage and eloquence of a pagan hero or a classical orator, but in this case for self-sacrifice and charity, rather than conquest and glory. It thus becomes the model for the contrast between the Judeo-Christian ethic and that of paganism, ancient or modern.

- By referring to Israel as "thy servant" and "our father" Judah also unintentionally Joseph that he has inverted the natural order by making himself the master of his father. Cf. Matt. 22:43-45.

2. Judah begins the speech by referring to himself as the servant of Joseph, and describing Joseph as the equal to Pharaoh. At one level, the beginning is meant to be flattering to Joseph; but, at another level, it reminds Joseph not to be controlled by emotions, but rather to be in control of them as Pharaoh was said to be. Given that an interpreter and probably others are present, there is also a reminder to Joseph that the outside world may be perceiving him as equal to Pharaoh and thus that he may need to be more careful, for many reasons including avoiding anything that would cause Pharaoh to feel threatened. In addition, it may have unintentionally reminded Joseph of his choice between being allied with the Egyptians or being united once again with his family.

3. Judah then recounts their original meeting, which he may think Joseph does not remember entirely. He emphasizes the fact that Benjamin is so precious and beloved by Israel. Here there is no hint of the earlier jealousy that led to the betrayal of Joseph.

- At one level, the description simply recounts the situation. At another level, it sets up the poignancy and great tragedy of losing Benjamin. In addition, the account subtly reminds Joseph of his earlier mistake (at least as it appears to others) in believing that the brothers were spies and thus calls him to humility. There is also a reminder that it was because of Joseph's demand that Benjamin came at all.

4. Judah then gives a very vivid and poignant picture of Israel as having only one of his two beloved sons left, and now about to lose that one. It is odd that he describes Joseph and Benjamin as the only two sons of his wife, especially given that Leah, the mother of six of the brothers is also his wife. However, Judah again shows no jealousy at this preference. The great value of piety towards his father shows through in a fashion that is both very dramatic and very human.

5. Judah then appeals to both compassion and honor. He first argues that leaving Benjamin behind as a slave would

bring depression and death to Israel. He then argues from the point of honor that he had promised to bring Benjamin back and gave himself as surety for him.

6. Judah then comes to the dramatic climax in which he offers himself in place of Benjamin. At this point, the formerly decadent and selfish Judah now becomes a prefigurement of Moses and finally of Christ.
 - When the people turned to worshipping the golden calf, God threatened to destroy them, but then forgave them when Moses asked His forgiveness. In that case, Moses offered to be destroyed along with the people, but as with Joseph the offer was refused. See Ex. 32:31-32.
 - God finally takes the perfect offer of personal redemption in the case of Jesus, offering Himself as a slave and a victim for our sins.
 - He is not a perfect prefigurement, for his is not really innocent (having committed betrayal against Joseph and deceit and decadence with Tamar.) But here he becomes the self-sacrificing hero that a good leader should be, not for the glory of the world, but for family and honor. For, as Judah perceives the situation, if his offer is taken, he will go into a slavery that the world thinks of as unheroic, although perhaps his memory will live on in his sons.

II. Chapter 45 describes the next scene. With Judah's great offer, Joseph can conceal himself no more and thus reveals his identity to his brothers.

A. Although he has been in command of the situation up until now, Joseph is completely overcome with emotion and orders everyone except the brothers out of the room.

1. There is certainly a desire to be joined again to his brothers, but he has been able to do that for some time. There is perhaps greater joy in the clear fact that his father is still living and mourning for him.

2. There is perhaps a greater joy in the progress of his brothers, for he wept for the first time when Reuben acknowledged their collective guilt without realizing that Joseph could hear him. See Gen. 42:24.

3. There also may be a sense of guilt at his deception and at having let his father believe for years that he was dead, when in fact he was viceroy of Egypt.

4. Whatever the reason, Joseph no longer appears as the dominant, powerful figure, but rather in very human form surrounded by conflicting emotions.

B. Joseph then speaks to the brothers in their own language, revealing himself to them, asking about his father and explaining his own time in Egypt as due to the hand of God.

1. The question about his father seems to reflect an astonished joy that his father is still living. Perhaps he thought that his own apparent death would lead Israel's own. He does still indicate some distance, asking about his father, rather than our father.

2. Joseph then describes their betrayal of him in terms of God's providence working to save the family and whole peoples. It is not clear when Joseph came to this discovery, earlier or at this moment, but he is here able to accept the injustice to him as providential. In this speech, he plainly refers (for the first recorded time) to the work of God.

3. Joseph's description brings up the entire issue of the providence of God and why He permits evils, and especially sins. God would not will that a person commit a sin, but still works through the suffering of His faithful people, culminating in the sacrifice of Christ. See, e.g., Col. 1:24-28; James 1:12-15; 1 Pet. 4:12-13. This mystery of why God allows evils will be

the theme of the book of Job and a continual question. See Catechism 309-314. One answer to the question of evils is that we must be allowed to commit evil if we are to be free. See Catechism 311. St. Thomas Aquinas more emphasizes the point that that God would never allow an evil unless He intended to bring a greater good from it. See Summa Theologica Part I, question 2, article 3 reply 1. It is that aspect that Joseph describes here.

4. He tells his brothers that they need not be distressed, for God was working through their actions. However, that fact does not eliminate their guilt. As Jesus will later say of Judas, the crucifixion was going to take place, but Judas still bore the guilt of betrayal (as the others involved bore guilt in different respects.) See Mark 14:21; see also Matt. 18:6-7.

5. For the time being, there is reconciliation. However, the ten brothers who betrayed Joseph will later wonder whether Joseph's forgiveness will last after the death of Jacob. There, it will become clear that Joseph bears no grudges. Gen. 50:15-21.

6. There is perhaps a future tension building in Joseph's description of himself as the father to Pharaoh. Neither the Pharaoh nor the Egyptians would likely want to accept that this foreigner is ruling, even if he has taken up Egyptian practices. Such jealousy may be a reason for the later enslavement of the Hebrews.

C. Joseph then tells them to go back to his father and give him the glorious news that he, Joseph, is alive and viceroy in Egypt. He proposes that Israel relocate the entire family in Goshen, a part of Egypt that would have presumably been good for cattle raising. There Joseph can be sure that the family is well provided for.

1. At one level, the proposal makes sense, for the move will guarantee the prosperity of the people of God. On the other hand, it does move them away from their promised land; and being in Egypt could tempt them to worship foreign gods. It does not seem that Joseph or his brothers worry much about it. Israel does seem to be worried, for God has to assure him that He will provide for His people in Egypt. See Gen. 46:2-4.

2. Joseph does understand that his family must keep their ancient heritage, as implied by the special place they will live, and by the fact that they will continue to keep animals there. Egyptians emphasized farming much more than cattle raising. When the Israelites leave Egypt 400 years later, they will take the cattle back with them. See Ex. 10:24-26, 12:32.

D. There is then an emotional reconciliation among the brothers. Even here, Benjamin is preferred to the others, but that fact

does not seem to cause any jealousy.

III. The people of God then relocate to Egypt, with the Pharaoh's blessing.

A. The Pharaoh then makes a proposal largely (but not completely) along the lines Joseph had proposed.

1. The Pharaoh is pleased that Joseph's family has arrived. The reason for that fact is not clear. It could be simple compassion, for it is likely that sometime in the 10 years, Joseph explained the situation and a longing to be reunited with the family to the Pharaoh. It could be that, if the family comes to Egypt, Joseph will not feel any temptation to try to leave Egypt. It could also be that the Pharaoh believes that God will bless his country all the more with Joseph's family.

2. At one level, the Pharaoh's offer is more generous, for he gives the Chosen People the best land and great wealth delivered on pack animals. He may be suggesting a life of leisure with the words "you shall live off the fat of the land."

3. At a deeper level, the offer is dangerous, for it makes the Hebrew people dependant upon Pharaoh and would likely lead to jealousy, as it eventually does. In addition, the leisure allowed by this prosperity can easily make a people lazy and open to oppression. Thus, there is an implicit warning against such practices.

B. The brothers are eager to take up the offer, but Israel is a bit more cautious.

1. The brothers, now filled with the riches of Egypt return to Israel, apparently wearing Egyptian apparel, with Joseph having even five Egyptian garments.

2. The text calls the father Jacob at first, indicating that he is not acting fully as the founder of a country (Israel) that he is called to be. As he decides to return to see Joseph in Egypt, he takes again that role. It appears that the restoration of Joseph reminds Israel of his calling. The back and forth reference to the father as Jacob or Israel in

indicative of a common habit of people of recognizing at some times and forgetting at some times their vocation.

3. At first, Jacob can hardly believe the news. However, the evidence of the vast amount of treasure from Egypt convinces him. It is unfortunate but true that people often come to believe only when shown favor, not in prayer, holiness or mutual trust. But God works with us where we are.

4. Initially, Israel only proposes to see Joseph once more. He is perhaps understandably worried about moving to this foreign land and worried about losing his independence. However, God once again appears to him, telling him to take this risk. A Jew reading this account would know that the Chosen People were in slavery for centuries because of this relocation, but God had commanded it all the same. It is an indication of the fact that God's commands do not always seem best in a pragmatic view.