

THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM – PART VIII - SECTION III

JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS MEET AGAIN

I. Chapters 42 through 45 record the reunification and (partial) reconciliation of Joseph and his brothers.

A. As the episodes begin, Joseph has been in Egypt for about 20 to 21 years (Twelve years before serving Pharaoh, seven years of plenty, a year of famine, and possibly a year before the predictions started coming true.) Including the time it took for the Ishmaelites to get to Egypt to sell Joseph there, it has been about 21 – 22 years since the other brothers sold Joseph.

- Judah would have just returned from his absence from the family of Jacob. Joseph was about 40 at this point, Benjamin about 22 or 23, and the other brothers in their 40s. Dinah seems to be out of the picture.

- Jacob was about 54 when Joseph was born and is now about 94, but still very much able to command respect. It is noteworthy that, when he speaks with the Pharaoh in chapter 47, he identifies himself as having wandered for 130 years. It is possible: (1) that he is referring to himself and Isaac together, and counting the time from when Isaac left Abraham's house; (2) that Jacob only finally moved to Egypt about 35 years after his initial journey there; or (3) that Jacob moved to Egypt during the famine, but that the meeting described in this chapter occurred much later under a different Pharaoh.
- Isaac (or perhaps his memory) is still alive at the age of 154.

B. The drama unfolds in three basic scenes: the first journey to Egypt and Joseph's initial hiddenness and testing; the scene in the household of Jacob as he is forced to overcome his reluctance to send Benjamin to Egypt; and the second journey to Egypt, resulting in the disclosure of Joseph to his brothers.

1. As the scenes continue, there are two developments. First, the brothers gradually come to a recollection and awareness

of their guilt. Second, Judah begins to take the leadership role, which his tribe will keep.

2. The text presents Jacob as a character we have sympathy with, but also as one who is still playing favorites, this time with Benjamin.

C. The text does not explain why Joseph's tests of the brothers through rather deceitful means. There are generally three main lines of explanation.

1. The Church fathers, and one line of Jewish thought, tend to argue that, through the testing and the worries about false allegations and the loss of a brother, Joseph is reminding them of their own guilt in order to bring them to repentance. See, e.g., Caesarius of Arles Sermons on Genesis 91:6; St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Genesis 64:11.

2. More recent scholars, along with another line of Jewish thought, tend to portray Joseph as maneuvering his brothers to be sure that they bring back Benjamin and Jacob, and gradually introducing himself so that they will not flee from him. See Leon Kaas, The Beginning of Wisdom 575-76

3. There is also a strong possibility that Joseph does not entirely know how to proceed. On the one hand, he wants to be reconciled with the family. On the other hand, he is prominent in Egypt and does not wish to put that position at risk by associating himself too much with his foreign family. The fact that he changes plans at the first meeting from keeping nine of his brothers in Egypt to keeping only one may indicate this uncertainty.

II. The first meeting is occasioned by a famine in Canaan as well and Egypt. In an encounter that it seems neither side anticipates, Joseph forces his brothers to confront their guilt and promise to return, without ever revealing his identity.

A. The encounter opens with the famine spreading to Canaan and Jacob reasserting control of the situation.

1. It is clear that the brothers are uncertain what to do, and so Jacob must take charge.

2. It is also clear that, unlike Pharaoh, neither they nor their neighbors have saved for an emergency, indicating both that God had not warned them and that saving out of prudence was not generally practiced, possibly because of the possibility of theft.

3. Jacob keeps Benjamin with him despite the fact that Benjamin is fully an adult. Jacob now prefers Benjamin as the only remaining son of his beloved Rachel.

B. When the brothers come to Joseph, he recognizes them, but they cannot recognize him, in part because of the years and in part because he has taken on an Egyptian dress and presence (e.g., with a clean shaven face.)

C. Joseph accuses them of being spies sent to scout out the land (more literally "to look on the nakedness of the land.")

1. The implication is that either: (1) the neighboring nations may be plotting to invade Egypt to seize the stores; or (2) a larger nation, most likely the Syrian or Babylonian, may be thinking about invading Egypt to gain the wealth.

- The first war of which we have any real records occurred between Egyptian and Syrian forces in Megiddo (later called Armageddon) in the north of what was to become Israel.

2. Joseph may be delaying because he wants them to stay but does not know how to proceed. Or he may be giving them a reminder of their own past deceitfulness.

3. In any case, the brothers defend themselves by referring to the family in terms that are true, but conceal what became of the one brother whom they describe as lost. The idea is that a country sending spies would not send ten brothers from one family.

D. Joseph then initially proposes that they must stay in captivity, sending only one of their number back to get Jacob and Benjamin. It seems that, after three days, he changes his mind and sends all but one back, possibly to reduce Jacob's anxieties

and possibly because the one brother who is sent back may not make it.

1. It is becoming clearer that Joseph is very anxious about Benjamin, who is his only full brother.
2. The brothers agree to the arrangement, but are very anxious, probably because they do not know whether they will be able to get Jacob to send Benjamin back. In addition, Joseph has not yet revealed which one will be left behind.
3. The brothers recognize their guilt, a recognition that Joseph overhears. At this point, Joseph is overcome by emotion. He may want to be reconciled immediately, and realize fully the sorrow Jacob will feel, but he thinks that he must carry out his plan. He must also decide which brother to keep.
 - Reuben speaks angrily to his brothers, excusing himself partially at least from the guilt of betraying Joseph. It is true that he did not wish to harm Joseph. However, he exaggerates how much he opposed their plan.
 - Here as so often in human thought, guilt lies hidden for years, but is never really forgotten.
4. Joseph has Simeon bound and kept. The text does not mention the reason. It is possible that he thought of Simeon as the leader, for Simeon and Levi had inspired the attack upon the city of Shechem.

E. Joseph then uses another stratagem, having their money placed back into their sacks. He may have meant the maneuver to be generous and make sure they would have enough resources, but it could also have possibly to confuse the brothers and to be sure that they would return.

- When the brothers open their bags, they and then Jacob are worried that the Egyptians will think that they stole the money back again.

III. When the brothers return to Jacob, he at first does not want to let Benjamin return to Egypt, but is persuaded to do so by circumstances and the advice and offer of Judah.

A. When the brothers tell Jacob of Joseph's demand that Benjamin return, Jacob refuses, worried that the arrangement is simply an attempt to deprive him of all his children.

- Rueben makes a well-intentioned, but foolish offer that his own two sons may be killed if they do not bring Benjamin back. Jacob is too intelligent and too just to place any value on that promise. The episode indicates that Rueben is simply unable to take the leadership role, for he lacks the ability to judge what is both just and persuasive.

B. However, the famine is continuing a year later, and the situation demands a change in plans from Jacob

1. At first, Jacob wants to send his ten sons again, but this time to request only "a little food." It does appear from the offering of fruits, nuts and honey, that he will later tell his sons to bring that he does have some provisions in the land. The problem may have been more with feeding the cattle.

2. Judah is now in the leadership role and reminds Jacob of Joseph's demand that they can only return with Benjamin. Jacob shows his human frailty by complaining unjustly about his sons' conduct in Egypt. At one level, we can sympathize with him. At another level, it is clear that his favoritism, especially at the clear expense of Simeon is unworthy of a father.

3. Judah once again comes to the forefront a threefold persuasive argument.

a. First, he argues that Jacob and his people, including Benjamin may well starve to death if they do not return to Egypt.

b. Second, he offers himself, rather than his remaining son, as surety. He has learned the principle that one can offer one's own life, not that of another.

c. He also reminds his father that the crisis would have long since been resolved had they returned at once. The implication is that Jacob will forever be anxious until he tries out the risk of sending Benjamin to Egypt.

C. Jacob agrees with the plan and, still asserting authority, sends his sons back with not only the money for this journey and the last purchase, but with additional gifts of food and spices.

1. The additional gifts may have been an attempt to appease the authorities in Egypt. It may also be an attempt either: (1) to give a show of wealth, and thus an implication of equal bargaining power with the Egyptians; or (2) in the reverse direction, as desire to risk all on this project by sending even scarce food on the journey. The willingness to use strategies and generosity to persuade people is characteristic for Jacob, as he did with Esau, but the willingness to take such risks is not. His character has grown a little in the crisis, and he is beginning to show his original shrewdness

2. Then Jacob finally invokes the name of God (El Shaddai – God Almighty) and a willingness to suffer if God wills it. The crisis has forced Jacob to rely again on God.

IV. The now eleven brothers then journey back to Egypt for what will be the grand reunification. The encounter goes at first well, but only to set up the test with Benjamin and Judah.

A. Joseph at first both shows them honor by having them dine with him in his house, but also lets them wonder what is going on.

1. By having them stay at his house and dine with him, Joseph is showing them great honor. In addition, as the text will later indicate, because Egyptians did not dine with outsiders, Joseph is beginning to show himself as united with them.

2. The Egyptian servants must have wondered exactly what was going on. Some of them had probably made inquiries and discovered that Joseph had been brought as a slave to Egypt from the area around Canaan; and they may have thought that he was greeting people he knew, or even begun to guess at the full truth.

3. However, Joseph's brothers are understandably anxious at being separated from the rest of the people who are coming

to buy provisions. And so they jump in with a defense of their own possession of the money that was supposed to have been the price for the food given a year earlier.

B. The chief steward then puts them at ease by referring to the reappearance of their money as a miracle rendered by their God and the God of their father.

1. It is noteworthy that the steward (who no doubt knew the truth) wants them to be confident in the true God, which he personally probably thinks of only as an outside power. Sometimes God can send people outside of the faith to draw His own people back to the faith.
2. The steward then brings out Simeon, indicating that Joseph has confidence in them. It appears that Simeon has been well treated. There must have been a great relief among the brothers, although they probably still wondered what was going to happen next.

C. The steward then treats them as honored guests and they begin to proceed with the original plan of giving gifts to him, as Jacob had instructed. But still they remember to bow low, for they know that they are simply guests of their powerful protector, who holds all the cards.

D. Joseph then addresses them very courteously, asking about the family. The brothers must have wondered at the unexplained change. In a very poignant moment, he then recognizes Benjamin, who he loves now more than ever and to whom he gives a special blessing. Joseph is overcome by emotion, but must disguise it for now.

E. Joseph seats them from oldest to youngest, indicating his knowledge of their relative ages, which they presumably had not told him. They may have been thinking that he had supernatural knowledge. On the one hand, they would be glad that they were in the favor of such a powerful person. On the other hand, it may have gradually dawned on them that he may be able to discern their guilt as well.

- That ability to discern guilt may have actually tempted some of them to want to steal his divining cup. When it appears to have been stolen by Benjamin, the brothers may have been thinking in those terms.

F. However, despite their anxieties, the meal goes very well with great joy. At this point, the brothers must have been filled with excitement at their apparent success beyond anything they could expect.