

Genesis 44: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Genesis chapter 44 Then he commanded the steward of his house, Fill the men's sacks with food, as much as they can carry, and put each man's money in the mouth of his sack, and put my cup, the silver cup, in the mouth of the sack of the youngest, with his money for the grain.

And he did as Joseph told him. As soon as the morning was light, the men were sent away with their donkeys. They had only gone a short distance from the city. Now Joseph said to his steward, Up, follow after the men, and when you overtake them, say to them, Why have you repaid evil for good?

Is it not from this that my lord drinks, and by this that he practices divination? You have done evil in doing this. When he overtook them, he spoke to them these words.

They said to him, Why does my lord speak such words as these? Far be it from your servants to do such a thing. Behold, the money that we found in the mouths of our sacks, we brought back to you from the land of Canaan.

How then could we steal silver or gold from your lord's house? Whichever of your servants is found with it shall die, and we also will be my lord's servants. He said, Let it be as you say, He who is found with it shall be my servant, and the rest of you shall be innocent.

[1 : 14] And each man quickly lowered his sack to the ground, and each man opened his sack, and he searched, beginning with the eldest and ending with the youngest. And the cup was found in Benjamin's sack.

Then they tore their clothes, and every man loaded his donkey, and they returned to the city. When Judah and his brothers came to Joseph's house, he was still there. They fell before him to the ground.

Joseph said to them, What deed is this that you have done? Do you not know that a man like me can indeed practice divination? And Judah said, What shall we say to my lord?

What shall we speak? Or how shall we clear ourselves? God has found out the guilt of your servants. Behold, we are my lord's servants, both we and he also in whose hand the cup has been found.

But he said, Far be it from me that I should do so. Only the man in whose hand the cup was found shall be my servant. But as for you, go up in peace to your father.

[2 : 17] Then Judah went up to him and said, O my lord, please let your servant speak a word in my lord's ears, and let not your anger burn against your servant, for you are like Pharaoh himself.

My lord asked his servants, saying, Have you a father or a brother? And we said to my lord, We have a father, an old man, and a young brother, the child of his old age.

His brother is dead, and he alone is left of his mother's children, and his father loves him. Then you said to your servants, Bring him down to me, that I may set my eyes on him.

We said to my lord, The boy cannot leave his father, for if he should leave his father, his father would die. Then you said to your servants, Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you shall not see my face again.

When we went back to your servant my father, we told him the words of my lord. And when our father said, Go again, buy us a little food, we said, We cannot go down. If our youngest brother goes with us, then we will go down, for we cannot see the man's face, unless our youngest brother is with us.

[3 : 21] Then your servant my father said to us, You know that my wife bore me two sons. One left me, and I said, Surely he has been torn to pieces, and I have never seen him since.

If you take this one also from me, and harm happens to him, you will bring down my grey hairs and evil to Sheol. Now therefore, as soon as I come to your servant my father, and the boy is not with

us, then as his life is bound up in the boy's life, as soon as he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die, and your servants will bring down the grey hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol.

For your servant became a pledge of safety for the boy to my father, saying, If I do not bring him back to you, then I shall bear the blame before my father all my life.

Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the boy, as a servant to my lord, and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the evil that would find my father. In Genesis 44, several themes of the story come together. We've already seen a story like this before.

[4 : 30] A story where Laban pursues Jacob and Rachel looking for the teraphim. He searches from the oldest to the youngest. There's a death sentence declared over the person in whose possession the teraphim are found.

That story was recalled in Genesis chapter 37, as camels came from Mount Gilead, the place where the death sentence had been cast over Rachel concerning the teraphim.

And they take the son of Rachel down into captivity in Egypt. And now we see a similar pattern of events playing out again. It seems like the story of the teraphim might be coming to its ugly end.

The death of Rachel, the seeming death of Joseph, and now the death of Benjamin too. The brothers, as they're going back to the land of Canaan, are buoyant.

Their mission has seemed to be a success. But yet, there's this turn of events. This turn of events that they were not prepared for. They're pursued. And they're pursued as those who have stolen something from Joseph.

[5 : 32] Now, what they're accused of stealing is a silver cup. It's important that it is a silver cup. Once again, it was silver for which Joseph was sold into Egypt.

And now, he sent them back previously with silver in their bags. Now, he's given them a silver cup. And this cup isn't just any cup. It's a cup that represents Joseph himself.

It's his cup. It's the cup that he does divination supposedly with. We should note the similarity between this and the teraphim. The teraphim were supposedly used for divination too.

And so, we have the association of the cup with the silver for which Joseph was sold, with Joseph himself as it is Joseph's cup. They've stolen the cup. They stole Joseph at one point too.

And it's also connected with the means of divination, the teraphim, and that earlier part of the story, and the tragic destiny of Rachel and her children. Joseph is the provider of bread to Egypt.

[6 : 30] And here we see he's also the cupbearer. In chapter 40, there was a crisis with the chief cupbearer and the chief baker. And since then, Joseph has been the one who provides bread to the land of Egypt and to the surrounding nations.

But now we see he's also the one who has a cup. He is associated with both bread and wine. And the silver is also associated with the bread and the wine. The silver of the cup that he drinks from and also the silver that was given for the bread.

The reference to divination is important here. It gives the brothers that fear that he knows something about them, that he has some sort of occult insight into their guilt.

And their sense of their guilt has been an important part of their reaction to these events, the events of their first visit and then subsequently. The hidden knowledge of this Egyptian ruler brings their guilt back to them.

He has exhibited his knowledge of them already by seating them in a particular order and now they are searched in a particular order from the oldest to the youngest. In the same way as there was this searching beginning at Leah and then the handmaid's tents and then in Rachel's tent.

[7 : 43] We should also consider this against the background of the previous chapter. Joseph has shown favouritism to Benjamin. He has given him five portions rather than the one portion that was given to each of the other brothers.

That favouritism recalls the way that Jacob treated Joseph and favoured him above the other brothers. Maybe Benjamin wants to set himself up as a diviner, someone above his brothers.

His older brother had dreams of high status, of achieving some position over his brothers, had delusions of grandeur. Maybe his younger brother has these dreams too.

Maybe he stole this Egyptian official's cup as a means of divination for himself, as a means of gaining power within his house. And so you can see that Joseph has set this up quite masterfully.

He's put them in a position where they are tempted to be mistrustful of Benjamin. He's brought to mind the old tensions and raised some of those hackles perhaps that they have against Rachel's side of the family.

[8 : 46] But their response is very different. On this occasion, they all tear their clothes, united in grief with Benjamin and with their father. And this contrasts with chapter 37 where there are two people who tear their clothes, Reuben and Jacob.

A tearing that in Jacob's case occurs when he believes that his son himself has been torn. But here they're united in their grief and their concern. They're described as Judah and his brothers.

Judah is the effective leader of the brothers at this point. He's the one who can reunite the brothers but requires him to confess, to be one who stands up and takes action at this point.

Think about the meaning of his name which is connected with praise but also with confession. This threat to Benjamin is a threat to their father too. The threat that their father would go down to Sheol in grief.

Reuben has already rebelled against the father. They have tried to put away the favoured son of their father but now they seem to be acting very differently. Now they don't just bow down to Joseph but offer to become his slaves.

[9 : 55] But Joseph gives them an out. Only the person in whose possession the cup was found will be his slave and everyone else can go home. This will be difficult for their father of course.

He will see it as this tragedy from which he may never recover but they will be okay. They won't have to serve as slaves but what they do instead is show solidarity with their brother, with their father and with their whole family.

Judah admits the problem of the family. He recounts the speech of Jacob in a way that acknowledges the fact that he was not a child of the favoured wife.

My wife bore me two sons. My wife. What about Leah, Judah's mother? Once again there is a struggle between favoured and unfavoured sons.

People who have been shown favour and those who have not been shown favour and how they feel these tensions with each other. one tempted to vaunt themselves over the others and the other tempted to violent envy against the other.

[10 : 58] We see this in the story of Cain and Abel, in the story of Esau and Jacob and now in the story of Joseph and Judah. How should favour be used? Joseph has learned that favour should be used for the sake of the unfavoured.

And how should a lack of favour be responded to? This is what we see Judah doing here. They have the opportunity to leave Benjamin as a slave in Egypt but they do not take it.

This is the precise inverse of what happened in chapter 37. This is a situation where they are prepared to go down into slavery in Egypt in order to have solidarity with their brother.

This relationship between Benjamin and Judah is important too and it plays out in the rest of scripture in various ways. You can see it in the story of David and Saul, in the story of Esther and Mordecai, Benjamites, who intercede for the Jews, the Judahites.

Judah is a type of Christ too in some ways. He is someone who gives himself up for his brother and his brothers. He offers himself for the brother and in the same way Christ is one who gives himself up for us all.

[12 : 06] Judah was like Judas in the previous story. The one who betrayed, the one who sold this person into captivity. But now he plays a very different part.

There is a redemption of Judah in this story. A question to consider. Note the boundaries of the nation of Judah in the later history of the Old Testament.

Judah includes Benjamin, Judah and within its territory much of the tribe of Simeon. How might this understanding of later history help us better to read the story of Genesis?