

Genesis 43: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Genesis chapter 43 Why did you treat me so badly as to tell the man that you had another brother?

They replied, The man questioned us carefully about ourselves and our kindred, saying, Is your father still alive? Do you have another brother? What we told him was an answer to these questions. Could we in any way know that he would say, Bring your brother down?

And Judah said to Israel his father, Send the boy with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, both we and you, and also our little ones. I will be a pledge of his safety.

From my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever. If we had not delayed, we would now have returned twice.

Then their father Israel said to them, If it must be so, then do this. Take some of the choice fruits of the land in your bags, and carry a present down to the man, a little balm, and a little honey, gum, myrrh, pistachio nuts, and almonds.

[1 : 26] Take double the money with you. Carry back with you the money that was returned in the mouth of your sacks. Perhaps it was an oversight. Take also your brother, and arise, go again to the man.

May God Almighty grant you mercy before the man, and may he send back your other brother and Benjamin. And as for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved. So the men took this present, and they took double the money with them, and Benjamin.

They arose and went down to Egypt, and stood before Joseph. When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the steward of his house, Bring the men into the house, and slaughter an animal, and make ready, for the men are to dine with me at noon.

The man did as Joseph told him, and brought the men to Joseph's house. And the men were afraid, because they were brought to Joseph's house, and they said, It is because of the money, which was replaced in our sacks the first time, that we are brought in, so that he may assault us, and fall upon us, to make us his servants, and seize our donkeys.

So they went up to the steward of Joseph's house, and spoke with him at the door of the house, and said, O my lord, we came down the first time to buy food, and when we came to the lodging place, we opened our sacks, and there was each man's money in the mouth of his sack, our money in full weight.

[2 : 39] So we have brought it again with us, and we have brought other money down with us, to buy food. We do not know who put our money in our sacks. He replied, Peace to you. Do not be afraid.

Your God and the God of your father has put treasure in your sacks for you. I received your money. Then he brought Simeon out to them, And when the man had brought the men into Joseph's house, and given them water, and they had washed their feet, and when he had given their donkeys fodder, they prepared the present for Joseph's coming at noon, for they heard that they should eat bread there.

When Joseph came home, they brought into the house to him the present that they had with them, and bowed down to him to the ground. And he inquired about their welfare, and said, Is your father well, the old man of whom you spoke?

Is he still alive? They said, Your servant our father is well. He is still alive. And they bowed their heads and prostrated themselves. And he lifted up his eyes and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, and said, Is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me?

God be gracious to you, my son. Then Joseph hurried out, for his compassion grew warm for his brother, and he sought a place to weep. And he entered his chamber and wept there.

[3 : 52] Then he washed his face and came out. And controlling himself, he said, Serve the food. They served him by himself, and then by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because the Egyptians could not eat with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians.

And they sat before him, the firstborn according to his birthright, and the youngest according to his youth. And the men looked at one another in amazement. Portions were taken to them from Joseph's table, but Benjamin's portion was five times as much as any of theirs.

And they drank, and were merry with him. In Genesis chapter 43, there's a slowing down of the pace of the narrative of the book. We've seen this already in chapters 17 and 18, where about 13 years intervened between the end of chapter 16 and chapter 17.

And then there's a whole rush of events up to chapter 21 in the period of just over a year. Here again, we see a very brief window of time with long extended speeches.

The pace of the narrative is really slowed down. And the pace of the narrative more generally is important. When he has to, the author of Genesis can recount details very briefly and succinctly.

[5 : 06] But sometimes he goes into extreme, almost novelistic detail, as we see in this passage. So it's worth considering why is he slowing things down at particular points. Sometimes we'll see this even in a single narrative, such as in the story of Juru and Tamar, where a period of anything of up to 40 years is passed over in a few verses.

And then the text slows down to a crawl after the encounter with Tamar. The severity of the famine is mentioned at this point, perhaps drawing our mind back to chapter 41 and the dreams of Joseph.

The need for food drives Jacob to tell his sons to go down into Egypt again. But Judah reminds Jacob of the problem. The Egyptian ruler has called for them to bring back Benjamin with them.

Jacob is annoyed and wonders why they would ever have told him that there was another brother. But yet, clearly, he had been looking for that information from them. And they'd given him the information without thinking that he would ever require that they bring that son there.

Reuben utterly failed to persuade Jacob to allow him to bring Benjamin with him at the end of the previous chapter. But Judah persuades. Ironically, it was Reuben who tried to protect Joseph from the other brothers.

[6 : 15] And Judah that was instigating the plot to sell him and then to cover up his disappearance. This is another story of sacrificing the beloved son. We've seen several of these in the book of Genesis so far.

Lot has to be let go by Abram. Abram presumes, I think, early on, that Lot will be his heir. That Lot will carry on his name. That he will be the seed, as it were.

This son of his dead brother. But that's not to be the case. Again, he presumes that Ishmael will be the one to continue his name. Again, it is not Ishmael. And then Isaac.

He is called to sacrifice Isaac in chapter 22. The story of Jacob contains similar themes too. His mother and father have to leave him, depart, and to go away from them in order for him to be safe.

Joseph is sent down into Egypt. Simeon is sent down into Egypt and does not come back. He's in prison. And now Benjamin, that one son that remains to him, has to be sent too.

[7 : 18] In the story of Judah and Tamar, there are two sons who die at the beginning. And it seems, to Judah at least, that Tamar is responsible for this. Tamar married Ur, and then Ur died.

And then Tamar had relations with Onan, and Onan died. And so it seems natural that she's a woman who's causing all sorts of deaths in his family. He's not going to give his son, Sheila, to her.

But yet, until he gives the kid to Tamar, his family is not going to be restored from death. When he actually sends the third, the two sons are restored to him in Perez and Zerah.

And we're seeing a similar thing here. Until Benjamin is sent, Simeon and Joseph will not be restored. There are binding of Isaac themes then, themes of sacrificing the beloved son.

Judah's willingness to act as surety for Benjamin is setting the scene for his turning away from the pattern of his previous actions, and the situation being redeemed.

[8 : 17] He's now offering himself for the younger brother of Joseph, Rachel's youngest son. He covered up the death of Joseph. Now he's offering himself as surety.

They're sent with a sevenfold gift, different riches of the land. Like the caravan that went down to Egypt in chapter 37 that took Joseph with it, they are bringing balm, gum, and myrrh.

They're also bringing honey, pistachio, nuts, and almonds. This is a replaying in some ways of the caravan of chapter 37. And with it, they are bringing down double money.

They're bringing back the silver that was in their sacks. Now that double money may make us think of the firstborn portion. They're bringing that back with Joseph. Silver was taken from the sale of Joseph.

Now silver is being sent back as restitution, double portion. Seeing Benjamin from a distance changes the situation for Joseph. Benjamin's not dead.

[9 : 16] The other sons of Jacob have not destroyed his mother's son. The only thing left to him of Rachel. Now he lifts up his eyes and sees Benjamin. In a number of significant encounters within the book of Genesis, it's described in this way.

For Abraham lifting up his eyes and seeing the place where he's going to sacrifice Isaac. Isaac lifting up his eyes and seeing the ram caught in the thicket. Isaac and Rebecca lifting up their eyes and seeing each other.

Here again we're seeing that language used. A key moment is occurring. The fact that they did not come with Benjamin the first time led him to fear the worst. That they had done away with Benjamin. Now he sees Benjamin and he has the assurance that Benjamin is not dead.

And that there is hope. Benjamin is spoken of as his brother Benjamin. His mother's son. This is his strongest family attachment. It's the one brother he knows is innocent.

But also gives him some assurance of Jacob's part in the matter. He might have feared that his father sent him on a dangerous mission in order to get rid of him. He might have wondered whether Jacob was so angry after he had told him the dream that he just wanted to get rid of him.

[10 : 25] But now the fact that he held Benjamin back from harm and then only sent him on at this later point suggests to Joseph that actually his father was not involved.

Perhaps that's something that's going on here. He disguises his true emotions at this point but he weeps. His anguish was hidden from his brothers earlier when he was in the pit and now his emotion is hidden from them again.

There are key occasions of weeping in the story of Joseph and in the story of Genesis more generally. If we read the story of Jacob there are three key occasions of weeping. Esau weeps when he finds that he has lost the blessing.

Jacob weeps when he first meets Rachel and then the two brothers weep together when they encounter each other at the beginning of chapter 33. These different occasions of weeping first divided and then joined together are significant and likewise with the story of Joseph.

This gives us a sense of the power of the emotions that he's feeling but also connects with previous things that happened. He was once weeping alone away from his brothers when his brothers were eating at a distance.

[11 : 37] They did not see his weeping then. They do not see it now. They eat bread at a distance once again. These are not just novelistic details. They do give us a sense of the fuller picture of what's taking place and the emotional force but it's replaying something that's happened before.

Joseph orders them by age and they might wonder whether he has the power of divination which comes into play later on in the next chapter but the natural thing to do having arranged them in order of age would be either to treat them all the same or to distinguish the firstborn for special treatment but he singles out Benjamin instead.

Note how Joseph is setting things up to test whether they are still characterized by envy. He, although a younger brother, was favored above his brothers by his father.

Now he's favoring the youngest brother above the other brothers again and this favoring of Benjamin puts them in a situation once again where they are tested in how they will act towards the favored brother of the other mother.

A question to consider Can you see any significance in the many details that are given to us concerning the actions of the steward and the various ways that they move and Joseph moves within the house?