

Genesis 42:1-28

Joseph's Brothers Come to Egypt

Joseph had risen from the dungeon to become head of state second only to Pharaoh in Egypt. He was given a new name, a new wife, great authority, and an important job. He was commanded to save Egypt from the effects of a devastating seven-year famine. To do so he had implemented his God-given plan, and the people of Egypt survived. But this famine was so severe and so extensive, that people from other lands came to Egypt to get food as well. Among those starving migrants, were members of the chosen line of Abraham, from far away in Canaan.

This passage today begins the narrative of the reunion of Joseph and his brothers, which will eventually result in the entire family emigrating to Egypt. From the viewpoint of Jacob and his sons, the story is resumed from where we left off at the end of chapter 37, when Jacob's sons used Joseph's bloodied and torn coat to convince their father that Joseph had been killed by some wild animal. Some twenty-five years have passed since then, and other than the sordid account of Judah and Tamar, we know nothing about what had been happening in Canaan.

Jacob Sends His Sons

As we ended chapter 41, we saw that “⁵⁶when the famine was spread over all the face of the earth, then Joseph opened all the storehouses, and sold to the Egyptians; and the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. ⁵⁷And the people of all the earth came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe in all the earth” (Genesis 41:56-57). So we should not be surprised to read at the beginning of chapter 42 that “¹Jacob saw that there was grain in Egypt, and Jacob said to his sons, ‘why are you staring at one another?’ ²And he said, ‘behold, I have heard that there is grain in Egypt; go down there and buy some for us from that place, so that we may live and not die’” (v. 1-2).

Scripture uses this moment to introduce many disparities among the characters in the narrative. First, it was Jacob who could *see* that there was a need to get food, this despite the fact that he was going blind (Genesis 49:8). His sons simply stared at one another but did not see the need. Also Scripture contrasts the “wise and discerning” Joseph with his eleven brothers, who were taking no action, apparently, to counteract the effects of the famine. Scripture shows that they were incompetent, whereas Joseph was farsighted. Finally, we can recall that when Dinah was raped by Shechem, Jacob's sons were frustrated by his inaction. Now it was they who were passive as the famine spread through Canaan.

We do not know how Jacob knew there was grain in Egypt. Perhaps a passing caravan of traders had informed him. But when he did learn, Jacob took action. The famine was severe in Canaan. Finding additional resources of food had become a matter of life and death. One must wonder if Jacob had begun to doubt God's promises of land, seed, and blessing. Recall that Abraham (then Abram) had gone into Egypt during a famine when he had first arrived in Canaan (Genesis 12:10-13:1). Perhaps Jacob remembered the story his grandfather had told him. Also, we do not know if the sons of Jacob really were ignorant of the fact that there was food in Egypt. Did they, perhaps, fear associating with the land into which they had sold their brother into slavery? True, it had been more than twenty years, but selling your brother into slavery is certainly a difficult thing to forget.

The brothers apparently neither argued nor resisted. “³Then ten of Joseph’s brothers went down to buy grain from Egypt” (v. 3). It seems the men simply did what their father asked. Remember that in this culture the patriarch did have absolute control over his family, regardless of their age or marital status. But, as we have seen, the sons of Jacob had not always shown great respect for their father’s authority. Perhaps, like Joseph in Egypt, God was working in them as well.

But not all of Jacob’s sons went to Egypt. “⁴But Jacob did not send Joseph’s brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he said, ‘I am afraid that harm may befall to him.’ ⁵So the sons of Israel came to buy grain among those who were coming, for the famine was in the land of Canaan also” (v. 4-5). It seems that Jacob had not overcome the habit of preferring one son above the others. It was now Benjamin, the remaining son of Jacob’s beloved wife Rachel, the son she had died giving birth to, who had replaced Joseph in Jacob’s heart.

Jacob feared that “harm may befall to him” (v. 4). He was concerned that some accident or treachery might befall this last connection with Rachel. Perhaps, too, he did not entirely trust the other sons to protect Benjamin. If he did not think that his other sons had brought about the death of Joseph, it was perhaps clear in Jacob’s mind that they had not protected him. He could not be certain that they would guard Benjamin either it seems. But it is not to Jacob’s credit that he is more concerned about this one son than about the other ten. Nothing must happen to Benjamin, but the other sons were expendable if it meant bringing back food from Egypt.

Along their way they must have met other travelers, after all they were “among those who were coming” (v. 5). They must have exchanged news and expectations of what they might find in Egypt. There were many different tribes and nations of Canaan, among others, who traveled the route to Egypt. But the narrative gives no account of the journey. The brothers simply left Canaan and arrived in Egypt. Certainly one of them must have mentioned Joseph as they traveled. I do not expect that they thought they would see him, but surely they must have wondered what had happened to their brother.

Interview and Accusation

The scene then shifts to Egypt, where we are reminded that “Joseph was the ruler over the land; he was the one who sold to all the people of the land” (v. 6). Scripture defines Joseph as having two roles. One, he is “ruler over the land” functioning as an administrator. He was Pharaoh’s highest ranking official. Second, Joseph “was the one who sold” grain to the masses of starving Egyptians and immigrants from foreign lands. His plan of the confiscation and preservation of excess grain during the seven abundant years was allowing Egypt to survive.

Joseph’s brothers knew the protocol that was expected of them. As they entered the audience chamber they must have been in awe of Egypt and of this man. Pastoralists who had likely never seen anything like the civilization of Egypt, it would have been easy for them to have been overwhelmed. With a certain amount of trepidation, they “came and bowed down to him with their faces to the ground” (v. 6). This act of deference was thought of as routine by the brothers, but to Joseph it meant the fulfillment of his dream (Genesis 37:5-8). The sheaves had, unknowingly, bowed down.

Joseph must have been astonished. Certainly he knew that people from all over the Middle East were coming to Egypt to buy grain, but did he really expect his brothers to be among them? And practically speaking, we must recognize God's sovereignty in all of this. There were many places in Egypt where grain was being distributed. Certainly, Jacob's sons went to a place near the northeastern part of Egypt, the part of Egypt closest to Canaan. But this was a very highly populated part of Egypt and even here there must have been many centers from which grain was distributed. But as God had ordained, Joseph happened to be at the one place the brothers went.

“When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he disguised himself to them and spoke to them harshly. And he said to them, ‘where have you come from?’ And they said, ‘from the land of Canaan, to buy food’” (v. 7). We do not know exactly when Joseph spotted his brothers, but it must have been before they bowed down to him. After all, he had time to disguise himself, though Scripture is unclear as to what he did precisely. Perhaps he saw them as they entered, or maybe he noticed them as they waited to be called before him. In any case, it required an unbelievable amount of self-control for Joseph to remain composed.

We cannot know what Joseph was thinking. Was he glad his brothers were still alive? After all, many people must have perished in the famine. Did he wonder about his father? Did he notice right away that Benjamin was not among them? Did he simply relive his memories of being thrown in a pit and then sold into slavery? Certainly he can be excused if he “spoke to them harshly” (v. 7). He did not disguise his anger as he disguised his identity. He meant to use his position of authority to intimidate them. He was laying the groundwork for an accusation.

He asked them one question. From where had they come. He did not need to ask why they were in Egypt, because that would have been obvious. An unnamed brother acted as spokesman for the group. He explained that they were from the land of Canaan and they had come to buy food. The question had been a mere formality. “Joseph had recognized his brothers, although they did not recognize him” (v. 8).

This may seem incongruous, but in fact the brothers were all adults when Joseph had last seen them and though they certainly aged in twenty-five or so years, the change in their physical appearance was not the same as in Joseph, who had gone from being a boy to a man. Furthermore, Joseph was clean shaved (even his head), had an Egyptian name, and wore Egyptian attire. And, as we will see, he spoke through an interpreter. Finally, the brothers might have expected to discover that their brother was enslaved, or had died, but they could not possibly have imagined that he would have risen to be second only to Pharaoh in all the land of Egypt.

Whoever did the speaking must have been nervous, wondering if they were to be dismissed without gaining any of the grain they so desperately needed. But if that was the only concern of the brothers, they had underestimated the potential wrath of the man they addressed. “And Joseph remembered the dreams which he had about them, and said to them, ‘you are spies; you have come to look at the undefended parts of our land’” (v. 9).

This first accusation by Joseph would be followed by four repetitions of it as the interview with his brothers continued over the next several minutes. And Scripture makes it clear that Joseph's motivation

was not the memory of his ill-treatment by his brothers, but rather that he remembered his dreams. He was now in that position of authority that God had promised, and he took the opportunity to use it (though as we see, not charitably). Those dreams, which had been the cause of his brother's resentment, had now come to pass. It should be stated that the fact that the brothers had entered Egypt conspicuously as a group of ten, and in full Semetic dress, and had appeared publicly before the second in command of all Egypt, belied any thought that they might actually be spies.

Astonished, and no doubt terrified at being accused of spying, the brothers quickly denied the allegations. ¹⁰"They said to him, 'no, my lord, but your servants have come to buy food. ¹¹We are all sons of one man; we are honest men, your servants are not spies'" (v. 10-11). They told the truth, and even elaborated on their circumstances. They admitted their lack of resources in Canaan. They told of their family. They insisted that they were 'honest' men. They assured this great man before them that they were not all spies.

While Joseph was no doubt relieved to hear that his father was still alive, for that was implied in their response, one can imagine the look on Joseph's face as they described themselves as 'honest' men. Certainly he knew better. The self-restraint Joseph showed was a measure of the resentment he still felt and of the revenge he planned to exact from these men before he revealed himself to them. He would not let them off so easily or too quickly. So, "he said to them, 'no, but you have come to look at the undefended parts of our land!'" (v. 12).

The brothers were overcome with emotion. Strangers in the land without any resources other than the money they had brought with them to buy food, these men were very vulnerable. They had no friends; no one to validate their claims. They fell over each other in insisting that they were being misjudged. Now, it seems, they were all speaking. "But they said, 'your servants are twelve brothers in all, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan; and behold, the youngest is with our father today, and one is no longer alive'" (v. 13). They gave more details about their family. They informed Joseph that Benjamin (though they did not use that name) was still alive and well with Jacob in Canaan. This was the second piece of good news Joseph had received during the interview. Finally, we see that they stated that one of their brothers "is no longer alive" (v. 13). Again the look on Joseph's face can only be imagined.

The brothers were at a complete disadvantage. Joseph was not only all-powerful, but he was all-knowing. He knew them and all of their details before they spoke, but they were ignorant of their accuser. Still Joseph would not relent the pressure he put on his brothers. He was no more willing to heed their plaintive cries than they had been when he pleaded from the empty well. So, "Joseph said to them, 'it is as I said to you, you are spies'" (v. 14).

The Test

To examine their claims, Joseph proposed a test of their veracity. Glaring at them, Joseph said, ¹⁵"by this you will be tested: by the life of Pharaoh, you shall not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here! ¹⁶Send one of you and have him get your brother, while you remain confined, so that your words may be tested, whether there is truth in you. But if not, by the life of Pharaoh, you are certainly spies!" ¹⁷So he put them all together in prison for three days" (v. 15-17).

He stated his purpose clearly, “by this you will be tested” (v. 15). Joseph wanted them to prove they were not spies by demonstrating that they were telling the truth about their family. But already knowing that they were not spies, what were Joseph’s true motives, other than to repay his brothers for their unkindness to him. I think he hoped to see Benjamin, and this test would require that his younger brother be brought to Egypt. It also assured Joseph that his brothers would protect the boy on his journey, since if anything happened to him, they would be doomed. Producing Benjamin was the only way the brothers could prove they were not spies.

The tension created by this test was genuine. It reminds the reader of an event in the life of Abraham (Genesis 22:1-2). The word ‘tested’ actually means to ‘refine’ or to ‘purge’ and is often associated with removing impurities from metals.

“The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold,
But the Lord tests hearts” (Proverbs 17:3).

Also, let us notice that the test included an oath, “by the life of Pharaoh” (v. 16). Since Pharaoh was considered a god, this was equivalent to a Hebrew promising something in the name of the Lord. Yet, the test itself has a flaw. How would substantiating that the brothers had told the truth about their family guarantee that they were not really spies? In fact, since Joseph had recognized them, he knew who they were and that they were not spies. Clearly the point of the test was to retrieve Benjamin. And to give them time to consider, and to squabble over who would be the one to return to fetch Benjamin while the others remained in prison, Joseph “put them all together in prison for three days” (v. 17). They could get a taste of their future if they failed to produce Benjamin as they decided who would break the news to their father about the results of their trip to Egypt.

But just as Joseph’s brothers had changed their plan and removed Joseph from the pit only to sell him into slavery, so now Joseph had second thoughts. “¹⁸Now Joseph said to them on the third day, ‘do this and live, for I fear God: ¹⁹if you are honest men, let one of your brothers be confined in your prison; but as for the rest of you, go, carry grain for the famine of your households, ²⁰and bring your youngest brother to me, so that your words may be verified, and you will not die.’ And they did so” (v. 18-20). Joseph seems to have softened. “Do this and you will live” was a Hebrew shorthand for the understanding that proper actions bring about proper results. It became a part of the Law.

“ So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, which, if a person follows them, then he will live by them; I am the Lord” (Leviticus 18:5).

“So the Lord commanded us to follow all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God for our own good always and for our survival, as it is today” (Deuteronomy 6:24).

And is endured until the time of Christ.

“²⁵And behold, a lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, ‘teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?’ ²⁶And He said to him, ‘what is written in the Law? How does it read to you?’ ²⁷And he answered, ‘you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.’

²⁸And He said to him, ‘you have answered correctly; do this and you will live’” (Luke 10:25-28).

Joseph stated that they could believe him because he feared God. The generic term *Elohim* could be used by Egyptians, as it implied not the Hebrew God, Yahweh, but god in general. In practice it meant someone who was a god-fearer, that is, someone who behaved properly because they had a belief in a higher power.

Joseph also gave the reasons for his change of heart. It was clear that if nine brothers remained in prison and only one returned to Canaan to get Benjamin, that one brother could not possibly “carry grain for the famine of your households” (v. 19). To their surprise, Joseph had determined to give them grain *while* he tested them. But Joseph also perhaps considered that having nine of his brothers try to convince Jacob to let his youngest son go stood a better chance of success than if only one brother made the argument.

And the nature of the test had changed as well. Now it was no longer “will you bring Benjamin back?” but rather “will you leave one brother behind?” Joseph may have named his first-born son Manasseh, but he had not completely forgotten how his brothers had treated him.

But, again, Joseph’s test had an obvious flaw. If he had said something to the effect of “one of your brothers must stay here until you return with Benjamin and prove you are not spies and if you do not, then that brother will die” the test would make sense. But Joseph says that if the brothers do not return with Benjamin then they will not die. How can Joseph possibly threaten them in Canaan if they chose to return there and abandon the brother left behind? It may be that the implication is that if the brothers do not return, Joseph will give them no more food and, as the famine continued, they would eventually perish.

The Brothers Return Home

The brothers had no choice. Scripture simply states “and they did so” (v. 20). But before they left, they had a conversation.

“²¹Then they said to one another, ‘truly we are guilty concerning our brother, because we saw the distress of his soul when he pleaded with us, yet we would not listen; for that reason this distress has happened to us.’ ²²Reuben answered them, saying, ‘did I not tell you, “do not sin against the boy”; and you would not listen? Now justice for his blood is required’” (v. 21-22).

The brothers assumed that their current circumstances were a consequence of God’s judgment. And, to one another at least, they acknowledged their guilt as they remembered that “we saw the distress of his soul when he pleaded with us, yet we would not listen” (v. 21). Nearly thirty years had not dimmed their memory of the event at their encampment at Dothan. And it is only here that we finally learn that Joseph had pleaded for his life. He did not go passively into the well. We probably assumed that he had begged his brothers (he could not fight them being outnumbered eleven to one), but its mention here brings poignancy to this second interview with Joseph.

Reuben insisted that he had told them so. His “did I not tell you” (v. 22) must not have been well received by the other brothers. After all, nobody likes to hear “I told you so” when a decision goes badly. Nevertheless, Reuben believed he was vindicated, since he had expected to retrieve Joseph from the well when the opportunity presented itself (Genesis 37:21-22). He must have been particularly frustrated that now he was paying the price for their foolishness, and perhaps he was using this reminder of his former

opposition to their plan to support the argument that he, of all of them, should not be the one left behind as a hostage.

This conversation among the brothers took place in the presence of their brother. They assumed that they had no need to avoid the subject or even to speak quietly since they were surrounded by Egyptians who could not possibly understand Hebrew. That was foolish though since, with so many representatives of foreign lands in Egypt to buy food, it might have been suspected that there were interpreters about who could understand their language.

As a side note, this is the only place in Genesis where Scripture specifically states that peoples from different cultures required an interpreter to speak. When Abraham was in Egypt (Genesis 12) or with the Philistine Abimelech (Genesis 21), or when Isaac was with Abimelech (Genesis 26) or when Jacob visited Laban in Mesopotamia (Genesis 29-31), these conversations took place apparently without an interpreter being necessary. That does not mean that an interpreter was not present, or in some cases the parties may have been bilingual enough to communicate, but it does emphasize the point that the brothers had no idea Joseph was listening.

As Scripture relates it, “²³they did not know, however, that Joseph understood, for there was an interpreter between them. ²⁴Then he turned away from them and wept. But when he returned to them and spoke to them, he took Simeon from them and bound him before their eyes” (v. 23-24). The fact that Joseph had used an interpreter in speaking with them should have put them more on their guard. After all, if Joseph could not understand them, certainly his interpreter could. I think the point here is that Joseph played his role flawlessly and to the utmost, even using an interpreter to speak with his brothers. But here it became too much. Seeing their distress, Joseph could not maintain his composure. Not wanting to give away his identity just yet, “he turned away from them and wept” (v. 24).

Joseph gathered himself and resumed his role as second in command of all Egypt and as someone who did not trust those before him. Without saying another word, “he took Simeon from them and bound him before their eyes” (v. 24). We must wonder why Joseph chose Simeon. Perhaps because he was the second son born to Jacob and, since Joseph had just heard that Reuben had been his defender, Simeon was the logical choice (Genesis 29:31-33). It may also be that Joseph thought Simeon might be more easily abandoned by his brothers since they knew that Simeon was on bad terms with their father since he and Levi had led the attack on the men of Shechem. (Genesis 34:30).

As Simeon was being led away in chains, “²⁵Joseph gave orders to fill their bags with grain, but also to return every man’s money in his sack, and to give them provisions for the journey. And that is what was done for them. ²⁶So they loaded their donkeys with their grain and departed from there” (v. 25-26). Joseph gave three orders. The first, to meet their immediate needs, was the command that their bags be filled with the precious grain to hold off the famine in Canaan. The third, to give them provisions for their journey was also done immediately and in front of the gathering. But the remaining command, “to return every man’s money in his sack” (v. 25) must have been done later, while the brothers were preparing to leave.

It is difficult to know Joseph's motives. He had already established a test by which his brothers could prove themselves. As second in command of all Egypt he hardly needed to gather further evidence to prove his case. He simply could have ordered his brothers put in prison (as he in fact did for three days), if he so chose. And he did want to see Benjamin, not imprison his brothers for theft. Perhaps he was genuinely interested in providing for his family, and he knew that Pharaoh did not need the money.

Whatever Joseph's motives, as the brothers made their way home, ²⁷when one of them opened his sack to give his donkey feed at the overnight campsite, he saw his money; and behold, it was in the opening of his sack! ²⁸So he said to his brothers, 'my money has been returned, and look, it is right in my sack!' Then their hearts sank, and they turned trembling to one another, saying, 'what is this that God has done to us?'" (v. 27-28). This likely happened the first evening, since the animals had to eat every day. Some of the precious grain was needed to feed them and sustain them as they carried their precious cargo back to Canaan. It is curious that the silver was in the same container as the grain, but perhaps this was to ensure that the brothers did not notice it until they were well on their way home. Also, we can see that the impact of their interview with Joseph had left them fearful. At no point did the brothers assume that their money had been returned as a favor. Now, they were suspected as thieves as well as spies.

Takeaways

The restoration of the family had begun. But again, we must pause and reflect on the details. Of the thousands of people coming into Egypt to buy food from the dozens of food distribution centers in the land, how did it happen that the brothers came to the one place where Joseph happened to be? Being second in command of all Egypt, surely Joseph did not often busy himself by handing out food to immigrants. Our God is the God of not the great things only but of the details.