

Comments on Genesis 42

Towards the end of the last chapter, Joseph is enjoying success in his life after years of hardship. He is letting go of his anger and resentment (cf. 41:50-52). Then the predicted famine (cf. 41:3-7) takes hold of the entire area and all people of all nations come up to Egypt to buy grain (cf. 41:53-57), including his own family, as we see in this chapter.

While Joseph is starting to get over his old feelings for his family, it is clear in this chapter he has not yet forgiven them. His resentment resurfaces as he secretly challenges and tests them over the next two chapters to see if they are still the same after all these years. He has clearly not forgiven them, and doesn't until ch. 44.

¹ Now when Jacob saw that there was corn in Egypt, Jacob said unto his sons, why do ye look one upon another? ² And he said, Behold, I have heard that there is corn in Egypt: get you down thither, and buy for us from thence; that we may live, and not die. ³ And Joseph's ten brethren went down to buy corn in Egypt. ⁴ But Benjamin, Joseph's brother, Jacob sent not with his brethren; for he said, Lest peradventure mischief befall him. ⁵ And the sons of Israel came to buy corn among those that came: for the famine was in the land of Canaan.

v1-5 The effects of the famine set in, so Jacob insists his sons do something substantive, rather than just sit around and stare at each other (v. 1). He sends them to Egypt to buy grain, so they don't all starve to death (v. 2). Ten of the twelve brothers are sent (v. 3), with Benjamin being held back because of Jacob's fear of losing him too (v. 4). Thus do Israel's sons go to Egypt (v. 5).

v1 "Jacob saw", Jacob sees or hears from his local neighbors that they are buying grain in Egypt.

"corn", i.e., grain.

v4 "Benjamin, Joseph's brother", Jacob's preferential treatment for the last remaining son of Rachel continues to the present time in the story. The narrative reminds us of the underlying issues that caused Joseph to be sent into Egypt in the first place. And, it hints there may still be lingering resentment between the other sons and Benjamin, as there is certainly still a disparity in how Jacob treats them.

⁶ And Joseph was the governor over the land, and he it was that sold to all the people of the land: and Joseph's brethren came, and bowed down themselves before him with their faces to the earth. ⁷ And Joseph saw his brethren, and he knew them, but made himself strange unto them, and spake roughly unto them; and he said unto them, Whence come ye? And they said, From the land of Canaan to buy food. ⁸ And Joseph knew his brethren, but they knew not him. ⁹ And Joseph remembered the dreams which he dreamed of them, and said unto them, Ye are spies; to see the nakedness of the land ye are come. ¹⁰ And they said unto him, Nay, my lord, but to buy food are thy servants come. ¹¹ We are all one man's sons; we are true men, thy servants are no spies. ¹² And he said unto them, Nay, but to see the nakedness of the land ye are come. ¹³ And they said, Thy servants are twelve brethren, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan; and, behold, the youngest is this day with our father, and one is not. ¹⁴ And Joseph said unto them, That is it that I spake unto you, saying, Ye are spies: ¹⁵ Hereby ye shall be proved: By the life of Pharaoh ye shall not go forth hence, except your youngest brother come hither. ¹⁶ Send one of you, and let him fetch your brother, and ye shall be kept in prison, that your words may be proved, whether there be any truth in you: or else by the life of Pharaoh surely ye are spies. ¹⁷ And he put them all together into ward three days.

v6-17 Joseph is in charge of all sales of grain, so Jacob's sons end up before him in the process of purchasing (v. 6). Joseph recognizes them, but they do not recognize him, and he questions them as though they are a threat to Egypt, invaders or thieves from Canaan (v. 7). The failure to recognize Joseph continues through the initial conversation (v. 8), so Joseph continues the deception, recalling the dreams of his youth where his family bows down to him, and accuses them of being spies (v. 9). They insist they are not spies, but are only interested in buying food, all being brothers in the same family (v. 10-11). Joseph reiterates the accusation (v. 12), they continue to deny and give more details about their family (v. 13). Joseph then devises a test to prove they are not spies, saying one will return to their home and bring the remaining brother to him while the others are kept in prison (v. 14-17).

v6 "bowed down themselves before him", in fulfilment of 37:7-9.

v7 "made himself strange unto them", the NAS renders this "but he disguised himself to them" and the JPS renders it "but he acted like a stranger toward them". On the initial meeting, they did not recognize Joseph, but he recognized them. Joseph was 17 years old when the brothers combined against him in 37:2.

Twenty plus years later, Joseph is now an adult and is shaved, made up, and dressed as an Egyptian, and is using an interpreter to communicate with them (cf. v. 23) to conceal the fact that he understands them. It is no wonder he is not recognized. They assume Joseph is dead, so they have no expectation of possibly seeing him again (cf. v. 13), let alone as an important Egyptian ruler.

The underlying emotional state of Joseph is also at issue. The last time Joseph saw them, they literally threw him in a pit. He now sees them before him and he is in a position of power and knowledge over them.

v9 Joseph's lingering anger and resentment is causing him to misinterpret the earlier dreams from his youth, as they bring to mind the reason for his brother's hostility and his subsequent exile, cf. 37:5-11. He recalls the part from the dream about them bowing down to him, but he presently fails to grasp the larger meaning of the dream, the eternal consequences, until 45:1-15, after Judah's appeal for compassion in ch. 44 changes his disposition. In the present moment, Joseph's anger is clouding his judgement, and his resulting behavior is unforgiving, hostile and deeply problematic.

"the nakedness of the land", the weakness or vulnerability of the land in a time of famine is being exposed to outsiders. That Egypt has food and the surrounding lands do not would make Egypt a tempting target of invasion for hungry nations and armies. Joseph uses this as cover for his mistrust of them, so as not to reveal his identity. Joseph is clear-headed enough to come up with a plausible contemporary rationale for his mistrust of his brothers, but he is not emotionally willing to forgive them for their actions over twenty years earlier.

v11 The problem with the assertions of honesty here is that Joseph knows full well what they are capable of, having tossed him into a pit. He also knows that Jacob uses his sons as spies, having been used as a spy himself, to tattle on his brothers, cf. 37:12-14. Joseph has no reason to trust them, and uses this as an excuse for his bad behavior.

The irony is the last time Joseph saw his brothers he had been sent by Jacob to spy on his brothers, and now the brothers are being sent by Jacob again, and Joseph's accusation is spying.

"all one man's sons", while the assertion is factually correct and a logical argument against them being spies, this assertion would have stung Joseph, owing to the way they treated him in his youth. Yes, they were all brothers, but they were not a cohesive happy family, so his memory of them is tainted. Furthermore, while they are all brothers, they are literally standing in front of the one "dead" brother and do not recognize him, and he is acting hostile, so while they are brothers they do not act like it.

The statement on their part also shows there is vulnerability in them coming to Egypt in one party. If there is a per capita limit on grain sales, then they need to bring as many brothers as possible to purchase more grain. But, in doing so, they also put all present at risk on the journey.

v13 The statement in this verse would be an emotional whirlwind for Joseph to hear. Their speaking of being twelve brothers, but one being absent and one being dead, which is actually himself, would plainly reveal they thought he was dead. If Joseph had any lingering questions over why his father never came looking for him, the favored son, why he wasn't rescued, it was now plain they all thought he was dead. All those years of suffering and slavery, and he wasn't dead, and they didn't know. Joseph's frustration was probably acute at this point. They threw him in the pit and caused all of this. And, yet, they still remember him as a brother, even though they think he is dead. And his younger full brother is still alive, so the others haven't killed him, and do still consider him a brother.

v15 "by the life of Pharaoh", an authority statement. Joseph's position affords him political power, and he is exercising it over his brothers, in a manner all would expect, both his brothers and his fellow Egyptians. Joseph is doing nothing to jeopardize his present powerful position in any way.

¹⁸ And Joseph said unto them the third day, This do, and live; for I fear God: ¹⁹ If ye be true men, let one of your brethren be bound in the house of your prison: go ye, carry corn for the famine of your houses: ²⁰ But bring your youngest brother unto me; so shall your words be verified, and ye shall not die. And they did so.

²¹ And they said one to another, We are verily guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the anguish of his soul, when he besought us, and we would not hear; therefore is this distress come upon us. ²² And Reuben answered them, saying, Spake I not unto you, saying, Do not sin against the child; and ye would not hear? therefore, behold, also his blood is required.

²³ And they knew not that Joseph understood them; for he spake unto them by an interpreter. ²⁴ And he turned himself about from them, and wept; and returned to them again, and communed with them, and took from them Simeon, and bound him before their eyes.

v18-24 After mulling it over for three days, Joseph softens his proposal (v. 18), saying instead that he will hold only one of them as hostage, sending the rest back with grain (v. 19), with them needing to return with the youngest brother, to prove they are telling the truth (v. 20).

The brothers all confer amongst themselves, thinking they are talking in private and not being overheard by Joseph, whom they do not realize can understand them, and they ascribe their bad luck to their own bad deeds against Joseph (v. 21), and Reuben castigates them for not listening to him (v. 22).

Joseph understands the entire conversation, which is effectively a confession, (v. 23) and is forced to leave their presence so they do not see his emotional response. He then returns and takes Simeon and binds him in front of them all.

v18 "for I fear God", one of the few professions of religion in a text that focusses largely on the secular aspects of the story. The irony here is Joseph is using the assertion as evidence of his forthrightness, while acting duplicitously. His words are egregiously hypocritical, as his anger and mistrust are informing his actions more than his religious piety. If he genuinely feared God, he wouldn't have subjected his brothers to these tests and the risks associated with them. This leaves the reader wondering if Joseph really does fear God.

v20 Does Joseph not believe Benjamin is alive? Does he want to see how they treat him? What exactly Joseph's motives are is unclear, and that may be intentional. Joseph's actions here are more emotional than rational, and while he has had three days to cool off, his actions are still clearly influenced by his hard feelings over the past.

v21-22 The brothers do not know Joseph ended up being sold into slavery, so they naturally assumed the worst. They now assume they are cursed as a result of bringing about Joseph's apparent death. The irony is these events resulted in both Joseph and his brothers being humbled. Joseph is cured of his brattiness and his brothers are chastened for their anger and duplicity. The adversity has softened the hearts of both parties.

However, while Joseph's heart is starting to soften, it is

not until Judah's impassioned plea in ch. 44 that Joseph's heart is broken and they do reconcile.

v21 This is the first time the reader is informed that Joseph was calling out for help from the pit to his brothers. This detail is not included in the original account in 37:23-24.

Also, this is the first time Joseph would have known that not all the brothers were in favor of disposing of him. Here, Reuben states in front of all of the others that he told them they shouldn't have combined against him and they wouldn't listen, and they do not deny it. Here is clear evidence that at the very least, Reuben was an advocate for Joseph's safety in his moment of need. This begins breaking down Joseph's wall of anger.

v22 "his blood is required", Reuben warned against shedding Joseph's blood in 37:22, and sees this as a reckoning.

v24 Joseph is forced to retreat so they do not see him crying, but he then returns to bind Simeon. Did Joseph go and get ropes or manacles as an excuse for his departure, as a means of concealing the reason for his disappearance?

"and took from them Simeon", why did Joseph take Simeon? We might guess that since Simeon is characterized as being a rather mean guy at times (cf. 34:25, 49:5-7) that he was one of the instigators when it came to picking on Joseph when they were younger. Reuben was senior to Simeon, but from the ensuing conversation it was clear that Reuben was arguing in Joseph's favor during the events of ch. 37, so Joseph spares him.

²⁵ Then Joseph commanded to fill their sacks with corn, and to restore every man's money into his sack, and to give them provision for the way: and thus did he unto them. ²⁶ And they laded their asses with the corn, and departed thence.

²⁷ And as one of them opened his sack to give his ass provender in the inn, he espied his money; for, behold, it was in his sack's mouth. ²⁸ And he said unto his brethren, My money is restored; and, lo, it is even in my sack: and their heart failed them, and they were afraid, saying one to another, what is this that God hath done unto us?

v25-28 Joseph has his men fulfill the order of grain, but also return their money, and additionally provide provisions for their journey home (v. 25). The nine brothers load up their donkeys and leave (v. 26). While traveling, staying at an inn,

one of the brothers goes to feed his donkey from the grain and discovers his money in the sack (v. 27). He reports this to the other brothers and they are all dismayed, fearing this is more of God's judgement against them (v. 28), as it will make it look like they didn't pay for the grain they left with.

v25 Why does Joseph have his men return the payment? Joseph likely sees his providing grain to his brothers as fulfilment of the vision of 37:6. See comments on 44:1 for further discussion.

v27 As only one brother discovers the silver and the others do not until they return home, the reader would assume the donkeys were fed from a single sack of grain as they traveled, so as to not compromise the initial packing job, forcing them to repack each time they stop.

The JPS Torah Commentary states the phrasing of the Hebrew suggests it is Levi, the next in line of seniority, who is the one involved.

v29 "What is this that God hath done to us?", clearly, it is Joseph who has done this, not God. They, being nonplussed, ascribe it to God's punishment. This is an all-too-common reaction when we do not understand all of the details of what is happening around us: we ascribe it to God. Yes, in the greater arc of the story, Joseph ultimately ascribes it all to the hand of Providence. But, in the details, it is Joseph's doing. If it is entirely God's doing, then the reader must confess the extraordinary degree of influence the Lord has in carefully managing the minutiae of details in daily life in order to obtain such particular outcomes.

²⁹ And they came unto Jacob their father unto the land of Canaan, and told him all that befell unto them; saying, ³⁰ The man, who is the lord of the land, spake roughly to us, and took us for spies of the country. ³¹ And we said unto him, We are true men; we are no spies: ³² we be twelve brethren, sons of our father; one is not, and the youngest is this day with our father in the land of Canaan. ³³ And the man, the lord of the country, said unto us, Hereby shall I know that ye are true men; leave one of your brethren here with me, and take food for the famine of your households, and be gone: ³⁴ And bring your youngest brother unto me: then shall I know that ye are no spies, but that ye are true men: so will I deliver you your brother, and ye shall traffick in the land.

v29-34 They travel all the way back home and tell Jacob everything that has happened to them, accurately relating the events, being entirely nonplussed that the "the man, the lord of the country" is Joseph.

³⁵ And it came to pass as they emptied their sacks, that, behold, every man's bundle of money was in his sack: and when both they and their father saw the bundles of money, they were afraid.

³⁶ And Jacob their father said unto them, Me have ye bereaved of my children: Joseph is not, and Simeon is not, and ye will take Benjamin away: all these things are against me.

³⁷ And Reuben spake unto his father, saying, Slay my two sons, if I bring him not to thee: deliver him into my hand, and I will bring him to thee again.

³⁸ And he said, My son shall not go down with you; for his brother is dead, and he is left alone: if mischief befall him by the way in the which ye go, then shall ye bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave.

v35-28 All of the brothers empty their sacks and discover all of the money has been returned, worrying them (v. 35). Jacob sees what has happened and refuses to send Benjamin, as he has already lost two sons, and refuses to lose a third (v. 36). Reuben swears if Benjamin goes with him that he will return, pledging his own two sons if they do not (v. 37). Jacob still refuses, saying it will kill him if Benjamin is also lost (v. 38).

v36 Jacob takes an unusually egocentric position in discussing the loss of his sons. He sees it as primarily his loss, not theirs. This may be intended to provide insight into Jacob's character, and why he played favorites among the sons: He was too self-centered to put what was best for the children first.

v37 Reuben means well, but in the previous case of Joseph, he was not able to return him home safely (cf. 37:22, 37:29-30), so why would Benjamin be any different? Jacob knows this, and refuses. Reuben is saying this as a means of a persuasive oath, reflecting the depth of his commitment, but Jacob knows additional deaths will not bring back the dead back, it just creates more suffering for all involved. And, besides, if Benjamin is lost, so too will Reuben.

"mischief befall him by the way", there is more to consider than just dealing with the mistrustful Egyptian authority who wants to see Benjamin, there is also the journey there and back, which might be perilous, given the famine. Jacob sees too much

of a threat to risk it.

Copyright © 2022 by S. Kurt Neumiller <kurt.neumiller@gmail.com>. All rights reserved. No part of this text may be reproduced in any form or by any means for commercial gain without the express written consent of the author. Digital or printed copies may be freely made and distributed for personal and public non-commercial use.