

## Comments on Genesis 44

After setting the brothers completely at ease, Joseph sets in motion his fourth and final test, whether the brothers will abandon Benjamin given the opportunity to do so.

<sup>1</sup> And he commanded the steward of his house, saying, Fill the men's sacks with food, as much as they can carry, and put every man's money in his sack's mouth. <sup>2</sup> And put my cup, the silver cup, in the sack's mouth of the youngest, and his corn money. And he did according to the word that Joseph had spoken.

<sup>3</sup> As soon as the morning was light, the men were sent away, they and their asses. <sup>4</sup> And when they were gone out of the city, and not yet far off, Joseph said unto his steward, Up, follow after the men; and when thou dost overtake them, say unto them, wherefore have ye rewarded evil for good? <sup>5</sup> Is not this it in which my lord drinketh, and whereby indeed he divineth? ye have done evil in so doing.

v1-5 Joseph tells the steward of his household to fill the sacks with food, return all of the silver (v. 1) and place his own silver cup into Benjamin's bags, which he does (v. 2). The brothers leave at dawn (v. 3) and after they were outside of the city walls, Joseph sends his steward after them, telling him what to say (v. 4-5).

v1 Why does Joseph keep returning their money? He never accuses them of being thieves, only spies. Joseph probably sees his providing them with grain as fulfilment of the vision of 37:6, which he explicitly recalls in 42:9. In that vision his sheaf of grain rose and stood up, while all of the others fell down. In the vision, Joseph's grain doesn't fail, while their does, and they defer to him because of it. Note on the second trip when the brothers approach Joseph's steward and attempt to pay for the grain, the steward says the payment is from their God and their father's God, cf. 43:23. This statement makes no sense unless the steward was in some way witting to Joseph's predictive dream and knew that Joseph saw the giving of grain as being their God's will.

One has to wonder if this was Joseph's way of showing them that if they had paid attention back then, they would understand what is happening now and realize that he is Joseph.

Also, while Joseph is being obedient in fulfilling the prediction of him providing grain to his family, he is clearly still not trusting his family. His anger and mistrust persists, but he is still acts mercifully towards them, so they do not starve and die.

<sup>6</sup> And he overtook them, and he spake unto them these same words.  
<sup>7</sup> And they said unto him, wherefore saith my lord these words?  
God forbid that thy servants should do according to this thing:  
<sup>8</sup> Behold, the money, which we found in our sacks' mouths, we  
brought again unto thee out of the land of Canaan: how then  
should we steal out of thy lord's house silver or gold? <sup>9</sup> With  
whomsoever of thy servants it be found, both let him die, and we  
also will be my lord's bondmen. <sup>10</sup> And he said, Now also let it  
be according unto your words: he with whom it is found shall be  
my servant; and ye shall be blameless. <sup>11</sup> Then they speedily took  
down every man his sack to the ground, and opened every man his  
sack. <sup>12</sup> And he searched, and began at the eldest, and left at  
the youngest: and the cup was found in Benjamin's sack. <sup>13</sup> Then  
they rent their clothes, and laded every man his ass, and  
returned to the city.

v6-13 The steward overtakes them and says what Joseph told him to say (v. 6). The brothers protest, saying that they have not cheated Joseph or stolen anything (v. 7), because they brought back the double payment, so how can they be thieves (v. 8)? The brothers then overcommit by swearing an oath that if any of them has the silver cup then they will die and all the rest of them will be slaves (v. 9). The steward responds by modifying their oath such that whoever has the silver cup will be his slave and the rest are innocent (v. 10). They agree and everyone quickly takes down their gran sacks and search them (v. 11). The steward searches their sacks from the oldest to the youngest and discovers the cup in Benjamin's sack, where he put it the night before (v. 12). The brothers rend their clothes in anguish, saddle up their donkeys and return to Joseph's house (v. 13).

v9 The brothers pronounce their willingness to observe the generally acknowledged legal penalties of theft and guilt by association, namely death (cp. 31:32) for the thief and enslavement for the associates. Little do they realize in so doing they put Benjamin in jeopardy of exactly what Jacob feared.

v12 The building tension as the steward searches from oldest to youngest must have been terrible, as the brothers would have felt vindicated as the search progresses until they reach the final youngest brother who then has the silver cup. Their confidence is crushed at the end with the final search. If the steward were prone to theatrics, he would have had ample opportunity to take advantage of the situation to build tension, knowing full well he put the cup in Benjamin's bags.

v13 "they rent their clothes", this is a Semitic tradition indicating great anguish or terrible emotional distress. One must remember that clothes back then were entirely handmade and of considerable value, unlike today where clothing is inexpensive and mass produced. So, tearing your shirt down the front was no small act of destruction. Their act here parallels Jacob's at his apparent loss of Joseph (cp. 37:34).

<sup>14</sup> And Judah and his brethren came to Joseph's house; for he was yet there: and they fell before him on the ground. <sup>15</sup> And Joseph said unto them, what deed is this that ye have done? wot ye not that such a man as I can certainly divine? <sup>16</sup> And Judah said, what shall we say unto my lord? what shall we speak? or how shall we clear ourselves? God hath found out the iniquity of thy servants: behold, we are my lord's servants, both we, and he also with whom the cup is found. <sup>17</sup> And he said, God forbid that I should do so: but the man in whose hand the cup is found, he shall be my servant; and as for you, get you up in peace unto your father.

v14-17 They all return to Joseph's house, Judah takes the lead of the brothers, and they all prostrate themselves on the ground in front of Joseph (v. 14). Joseph demands they explain themselves, and asks them if they didn't realize that he has the powers of divination (v. 15). Judah speaks to Joseph and appeals to them saying they will all be Joseph's slaves, not just Benjamin (v. 16). Joseph rejects his offer, saying only Benjamin will be his slave, the others are free to leave (v. 17).

Judah valiantly honors the oath he made to Jacob in 43:8-9 and attempts to put himself in the place of Benjamin regarding the guilt.

In v. 16 Judah appears to be attempting to shift the blame of the theft away from Benjamin and onto all of the brothers equally. In so doing he probably hopes to avoid the death penalty invoked in v. 9 by casting the blame upon the entire group. Recall that Judah is the one who made the oath to Jacob to return Benjamin alive to him (cp. 43:8-9).

Then in v. 17 Joseph informs them we will not kill Benjamin for the "crime", but will only enslave them. Naturally they would have taken heart at this, and Judah then takes advantage of the apparent mercy to plead his case before Joseph (v. 18-34).

Joseph then tests the brothers, exonerating all of them except Benjamin, releasing them, threatening only to hold

Benjamin. Again, Joseph is testing the other brothers to see if they will cast off Benjamin, they way they cast himself off.

<sup>18</sup> Then Judah came near unto him, and said, Oh my lord, let thy servant, I pray thee, speak a word in my lord's ears, and let not thine anger burn against thy servant: for thou art even as Pharaoh.

<sup>19</sup> My lord asked his servants, saying, Have ye a father, or a brother? <sup>20</sup> And we said unto my lord, we have a father, an old man, and a child of his old age, a little one; and his brother is dead, and he alone is left of his mother, and his father loveth him. <sup>21</sup> And thou saidst unto thy servants, Bring him down unto me, that I may set mine eyes upon him. <sup>22</sup> And we said unto my lord, The lad cannot leave his father: for if he should leave his father, his father would die. <sup>23</sup> And thou saidst unto thy servants, Except your youngest brother come down with you, ye shall see my face no more. <sup>24</sup> And it came to pass when we came up unto thy servant my father, we told him the words of my lord. <sup>25</sup> And our father said, Go again, and buy us a little food. <sup>26</sup> And we said, We cannot go down: if our youngest brother be with us, then will we go down: for we may not see the man's face, except our youngest brother be with us. <sup>27</sup> And thy servant my father said unto us, Ye know that my wife bare me two sons: <sup>28</sup> And the one went out from me, and I said, Surely he is torn in pieces; and I saw him not since: <sup>29</sup> And if ye take this also from me, and mischief befall him, ye shall bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave.

<sup>30</sup> Now therefore when I come to thy servant my father, and the lad be not with us; seeing that his life is bound up in the lad's life; <sup>31</sup> It shall come to pass, when he seeth that the lad is not with us, that he will die: and thy servants shall bring down the gray hairs of thy servant our father with sorrow to the grave.

<sup>32</sup> For thy servant became surety for the lad unto my father, saying, If I bring him not unto thee, then I shall bear the blame to my father for ever. <sup>33</sup> Now therefore, I pray thee, let thy servant abide instead of the lad a bondman to my lord; and let the lad go up with his brethren. <sup>34</sup> For how shall I go up to my father, and the lad be not with me? lest peradventure I see the evil that shall come on my father.

v18-34 Judah approaches Joseph and pleads with him to listen to his story (v. 18).

Judah relates the events of his convincing his aged father Jacob to release Benjamin to himself, because Joseph demanded it, telling Joseph that if Benjamin doesn't return home with them it will kill Jacob (v. 19-29).

It will kill Jacob because he loves Benjamin so much, and if they return without him, Jacob will die of grief (v. 30-31).

Judah then relates the oath he swore to Jacob that he would

do everything in his power to return Benjamin back to Jacob (v. 32). Judah then offers himself as a slave instead of Benjamin (v. 33), because he cannot return to Jacob without Benjamin owing to the harm it will do (v. 34).

Judah would rather live and die a slave than return to Jacob without Benjamin. The reader has to recall what Judah has been through, as related in ch. 38. Judah's two older sons both died, so he knows the pain of losing one's sons. Then he sins against Tamar in multiple ways, and is trapped in the sin against her into exposing his own sin, being humiliated. He is then forced to return home when famine strikes the land, being forced to reconcile with a family he left and who now is made aware of his shortcomings. Nevertheless, Judah takes up the role of lead brother among his brethren in protector of the family. We see here that Judah's oath to his father in the preceding chapter was real, as he is willing to sacrifice his own life to spare Benjamin and Jacob.

v18 "even as Pharaoh", Judah is ingratiating himself with Joseph, assuming he is an Egyptian and comparing him to the ruler of all Egypt. The appeal is also likely calculated to minimize the loss of a silver cup, given Joseph is so powerful and wealthy, even like Pharaoh, owner of all of Egypt. Yes, the contention is the silver cup was special because Joseph used it for divination, but Judah counters that Joseph is like Pharaoh, so a silver cup is nothing to him, easily replaced.

v20 "his brother is dead", Judah and the rest of the family have no idea what actually happened to Joseph, so they just assume as time passed that he must be dead. The original lie to Jacob became reality to them.

v27 Judah's explanation of the situation with Jacob, Rachel and Joseph and Benjamin lays bare the paternal bias in Judah's description, as it shows that the only wife Jacob really cares for is Rachel, despite having another full wife and two concubines. Judah is fully witting of his father's favoritism, his own inferiority in his father's eyes, and yet is still willing to keep the oath made with him to spare Benjamin and Jacob the fate. It must have been heartbreaking for Judah to say this and for Joseph to hear it, knowing full well the implications.

v28 "he is torn in pieces", this is the first time Joseph has

heard what Jacob thinks has happened to him. His father believes he was killed by wild animals. Joseph knows what truly happened, but he is the only one. Now he is hearing the other side of the story. If Joseph ever wondered why Jacob never came searching for him, he now knows.

v33 Judah had persuaded his brothers to sell Joseph into slavery rather than kill him (cf. 37:26-27). Now Judah offers himself as a slave to Joseph to spare Benjamin.

v34 "lest peradventure I see the evil that shall come on my father", Judah previously saw how Jacob mourned Joseph's loss (cf. 37:33-35), and he cannot stand to see it happening again.

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