

Comments on Genesis 45

Joseph reveals he is in fact still alive, and explains the whole story, but oddly enough, he doesn't explain why he has been deceiving them the whole time about his true identity. The brothers also don't explain their side of the story either. Regardless, they reconcile and send for Jacob's entire family and the whole batch of them move from Canaan to Egypt. Thus, setting the stage for the Exodus.

Noteworthy is that Judah's pathos in the preceding chapter is what elicits Joseph's pathos in the present chapter. Joseph's mistrust of the brothers is broken by Judah's sincere outpouring of concern over Benjamin and Jacob, and his willingness to commit himself to slavery to spare Benjamin and therefore Jacob. Joseph sees this as clear evidence the brothers would never do to Benjamin what they did to himself, and his mistrust and hostility melts away in a flood of forgiveness.

Interestingly, Joseph never apologizes for the way he treated his brothers, and they never apologize to him either, choosing to leave Joseph and their father in ignorance over what had really transpired some thirty years earlier.

¹ Then Joseph could not refrain himself before all them that stood by him; and he cried, Cause every man to go out from me. And there stood no man with him, while Joseph made himself known unto his brethren. ² And he wept aloud: and the Egyptians and the house of Pharaoh heard.

³ And Joseph said unto his brethren, I am Joseph; doth my father yet live? And his brethren could not answer him; for they were troubled at his presence. ⁴ And Joseph said unto his brethren, Come near to me, I pray you. And they came near. And he said, I am Joseph your brother, whom ye sold into Egypt. ⁵ Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life. ⁶ For these two years hath the famine been in the land: and yet there are five years, in the which there shall neither be earing nor harvest. ⁷ And God sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. ⁸ So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God: and he hath made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt.

⁹ Haste ye, and go up to my father, and say unto him, Thus saith thy son Joseph, God hath made me lord of all Egypt: come down unto me, tarry not: ¹⁰ And thou shalt dwell in the land of Goshen, and thou shalt be near unto me, thou, and thy children, and thy children's children, and thy flocks, and thy herds, and all that thou hast: ¹¹ And there will I nourish thee; for yet

there are five years of famine; lest thou, and thy household, and all that thou hast, come to poverty. ¹² And, behold, your eyes see, and the eyes of my brother Benjamin, that it is my mouth that speaketh unto you. ¹³ And ye shall tell my father of all my glory in Egypt, and of all that ye have seen; and ye shall haste and bring down my father hither.

¹⁴ And he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck, and wept; and Benjamin wept upon his neck. ¹⁵ Moreover he kissed all his brethren, and wept upon them: and after that his brethren talked with him. ¹⁶ And the fame thereof was heard in Pharaoh's house, saying, Joseph's brethren are come: and it pleased Pharaoh well, and his servants.

v1-16 Joseph is overwhelmed by Judah's plea for mercy (cf. 44:18-34) and can longer contain himself. Joseph tells the Egyptian servants to leave, including the Egyptian interpreter (cf. 42:23), and after they leave, he reveals himself to his brothers to be Joseph (v. 1). Joseph's confession and weeping is so loud the Egyptian servants who were just told to leave can still hear him outside (v. 2). Joseph tells them who he is and then enquires about their father Jacob (v. 3). The brothers are all entirely dumbfounded. Joseph tells them to come close to him, and then he explains to them that he is their brother Joseph, whose actions resulted in him being sold as a slave into Egypt (v. 4). He tells them to forget the past, because it all is for good as part of God's plan to save them from the famine (v. 5-8). Joseph then tells them to bring Jacob and all of their families down to Egypt, where they will be taken care of, because of Joseph's position (v. 9-13). Joseph is particularly affected at his reunion with Benjamin (v. 14), but is also reconciled with all of the brothers (v. 15). Word spreads through all of the Egyptian servants to Pharaoh's house, and all are happy about it (v. 16).

This section of text forms a well-structured inverted parallelism, as follows:

A a ¹ Then Joseph could not refrain himself before all them that stood by him; and he cried, Cause every man to go out from me. And there stood no man with him, while Joseph made himself known unto his brethren. ² And he wept aloud:

b and the Egyptians and the house of Pharaoh heard.

B ³ And Joseph said unto his brethren, I am Joseph; doth my father yet live? And his brethren could not answer him; for they were troubled at his presence. ⁴ And Joseph said unto his brethren,

C a Come near to me, I pray you. And they came near. And he said, I am Joseph your brother, whom ye sold into Egypt. ⁵ Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither:

b for God did send me before you to preserve life. ⁶ For these two years hath the famine been in the land:

c and yet there are five years, in the which there shall neither be earing nor harvest.

D a ⁷ And God sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

b ⁸ So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God:

D a and he hath made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt. ⁹ Haste ye, and go up to my father, and say unto him, Thus saith thy son Joseph,

b God hath made me lord of all Egypt:

C a come down unto me, tarry not: ¹⁰ And thou shalt dwell in the land of Goshen, and thou shalt be near unto me, thou, and thy children, and thy children's children, and thy flocks, and thy herds, and all that thou hast:

b ¹¹ And there will I nourish thee;

c for yet there are five years of famine; lest thou, and thy household, and all that thou hast, come to poverty.

B ¹² And, behold, your eyes see, and the eyes of my brother Benjamin, that it is my mouth that speaketh unto you. ¹³ And ye shall tell my father of all my glory in Egypt, and of all that ye have seen; and ye shall haste and bring down my father hither.

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b ¹⁶ And the fame thereof was heard in Pharaoh's house, saying, Joseph's brethren are come: and it pleased Pharaoh well, and his servants.

The first half (v. 1-8) represents estrangement and the second half (v. 9-16) represents reconciliation. The first strophe (v. 1-2) and the last strophe (v. 14-16) emphasize the estrangement and reconciliation, as in the first strophe Joseph is entirely separated from both the Egyptians and his family, and in the final strophe all are entirely united (note the repetition of "come near to me" in v. 4 and "come down to me" in v. 9). The center (v. 7-9) focuses on the Lord's greater purpose being

achieved in preserving the family through Joseph's successes in Egypt. Joseph recognizes the greater good in his suffering and defers to God's providence. In the text, this is where Joseph has entirely let go of his anger and mistrust and fully forgiven his brothers, by acknowledging there was a greater purpose and meaning to his hardship.

The larger theological message is that while Israel moving to Egypt preceded and resulted in the captivity and Exodus, it is important to remember it started with the Lord saving Israel by bringing them Egypt so they wouldn't starve and die, the great deliverance of v. 7. This first "great deliverance" of Jacob, his sons and their families leads to an even greater deliverance of the nation of Israel with the Exodus. Just as Joseph suffered in Egypt for the greater theological good, so does Israel suffer in Egypt for the greater theological good.

v1 Joseph's commands to his attendants would have been in Egyptian, so his brothers would not have understood what Joseph was saying to them when he told them to leave.

Joseph is also protecting his family's reputation, because he doesn't want the Egyptians to know their family was formerly fractious and the reason he became a slave was because of his brother's actions.

v2 "and he wept aloud", the previous two times Joseph wept (cf. 42:24, 43:30) he did so discreetly, hiding it from all others. Here, he can no longer contain himself, his heart has broken, and everyone around him knows it. He was formerly trying to hide his true identity from everyone, that has come to an end.

v3 The brothers are left speechless at Joseph's confession. Here is a man they have been dealing with for some time, who looks like and speaks like an Egyptian. He was formerly using an interpreter to speak with them. He tells the interpreter to leave and starts speaking to him in their native language, and he tells them he is their long-lost brother. Of course, they are dumbfounded by what is happening to them. What this man is saying is so beyond expectations, or even comprehension, that it defies description, they cannot believe it or understand it.

And, on top of that, the way this man has been treating them has not been particularly gracious, and now he says "I am your long-lost brother Joseph, the one you sold into slavery, hey, let's have a reunion, we're all happy and good now!" They are confused, maybe baffled, perhaps worried this is another trap. How could you even respond to such an outlandish

statement by this man who has been accusing you of being spies and taking one of you prisoner?

"doth my father yet live?", Judah's harrowing portrayal of the potential emotional harm done to Jacob scares Joseph. He fears his requirement that Benjamin come down to Egypt has harmed his aged father, which was not his intention at all. It is likely this is more of an emphatic exclamation than a simple inquiry into Jacob's well-being, as Joseph previously asked about him (ct. 43:27-28), and Judah has just told him that Jacob is alive, but worried over Benjamin. Joseph fears the worst for the unintended consequences of his own actions have had on his father.

v4 "your brother, whom ye sold into Egypt", Joseph is unwitting that his brothers originally intended to murder him. From his point of view, the traders who pulled him from the pit and committed him to slavery paid his brothers for him, but that isn't what happened. The slavers pulled him from the pit unbeknownst to the brothers, after they had decided to sell him into slavery. They never got paid for Joseph by the slavers, it was only an idea Judah forwarded in order to prevent Joseph's murder, and then when Reuben went back to rescue Joseph, the slavers had already taken him and they had no idea what happened to him. They then concocted the story about him being torn by beasts and told Jacob that and assumed the worst for Jacob, that he was dead. The brothers never actually sold him into slavery, let alone into slavery in Egypt, even though that is where he ended up, and they weren't about to tell him now that they were initially planning on murdering him. Joseph's statement of "whom ye sold into Egypt" is his short-hand assumption of what ultimately happened, him being unwitting to all of the details of the true account.

This statement by Joseph is his only explanation of why he has treated them the way he has, albeit obliquely. It is a slight rebuke for their past bad behavior (also cp. 50:20 for a similar statement), and a subtle explanation for his own bad behavior in not revealing himself to them immediately the first time they met.

v5 Joseph is telling his brothers to not be angry or upset at themselves for what they did to him some thirty years earlier that caused their separation. But, he has been angry and upset at them for the past year or so in his deception and series of

tests of loyalty and character. He is telling them it is time for all of them to forgive each other, because circumstances require it. They treated him horribly, and he treated them unfairly in return, and now they all need to forgive each other and be reconciled.

Note Joseph does not explicitly address his deceptive actions or apologize for them. He only mentions their sins against him.

v6 "shall neither be earing nor harvest", a poor translation in the KJV, the "earing" should be "plowing" or "tilling". The famine has rendered it pointless to plow the fields as nothing will grow.

v7-9 Joseph acknowledges the Lord's hand in his being placed into a position of power, for the benefit of others, particularly his family. As the reader goes through the arc of Joseph's life we see an arrogant spoiled brat who gets preferential treatment for no other reason than he is the firstborn son of the favored wife. As Joseph's life goes on, the repeated difficulties and trials chasten him, and while he still ends up succeeding in the end, it is after much suffering. He works hard in between and sheds his childish arrogance, becoming a responsible man whom the Lord guides into positions of power. The chastened and humbled Joseph recognizes this. Joseph is no paragon of virtue or piety here. He has had to struggle with his own feelings over the hardship he has suffered through, but, now, he has let go and recognizes the good that comes out of the bad.

v11 "for yet there are five years of famine", Joseph knew the prediction of famine from Pharaoh's dream and the interpretation given to him the Lord, which Jacob and his family would not know anything about. To them, they might not want to emigrate to Egypt, not knowing how long the famine would persist. Jacob is letting them know it has only just started, as they are two years into a seven year drought, with five years remaining. So, yes, they really do need to emigrate.

v12 "the eyes of my brother Benjamin", it seems like Joseph is making a particular appeal to Benjamin, his one full brother, that he be recognized by him, either through familiarity or by their shared physical appearance. Is Joseph saying they both look alike, because they both have the same mother? Or is he saying Benjamin and he formerly had a fraternal bond such that

Benjamin more quickly recognizes him than the rest of the brothers?

"it is my mouth that speaketh unto you", Joseph was formerly using an interpreter to conceal his ability to understand and speak their language (cf. 42:23). Now he is speaking their native language with them face to face without an interpreter. He uses that as evidence of his claim, he is saying, "I myself am speaking your native language to you myself, I know your language, see, I am your brother".

v15 "his brethren talked with him", contrast this with 37:4 where his brothers couldn't stand to talk with him at all.

v16 The happiness and unity in the present situation clearly changes by the time of Exodus chapter 1, and is presented here in contrast to that time.

¹⁷ And Pharaoh said unto Joseph, Say unto thy brethren, This do ye; lade your beasts, and go, get you unto the land of Canaan; ¹⁸ And take your father and your households, and come unto me: and I will give you the good of the land of Egypt, and ye shall eat the fat of the land. ¹⁹ Now thou art commanded, this do ye; take you wagons out of the land of Egypt for your little ones, and for your wives, and bring your father, and come. ²⁰ Also regard not your stuff; for the good of all the land of Egypt is your's.

v17-20 Pharaoh commands Joseph to send for his entire extended family and have them move to Egypt, with Pharaoh's assistance.

v18, 20, 23 "the good of the land of Egypt", this triple repetition forms a superlative. At this point in history, Egypt was the place to be, since the famine was making everywhere else uninhabitable. However, Egypt is not the land promised to Abraham, hence the conversation in 46:2-4.

²¹ And the children of Israel did so: and Joseph gave them wagons, according to the commandment of Pharaoh, and gave them provision for the way. ²² To all of them he gave each man changes of raiment; but to Benjamin he gave three hundred pieces of silver, and five changes of raiment. ²³ And to his father he sent after this manner; ten asses laden with the good things of Egypt, and ten she asses laden with corn and bread and meat for his father by the way. ²⁴ So he sent his brethren away, and they departed: and he said unto them, See that ye fall not out by the way.

²⁵ And they went up out of Egypt, and came into the land of Canaan unto Jacob their father, ²⁶ And told him, saying, Joseph is yet alive, and he is governor over all the land of Egypt. And Jacob's heart fainted, for he believed them not. ²⁷ And they told him all the words of Joseph, which he had said unto them: and when he saw the wagons which Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of Jacob their father revived: ²⁸ And Israel said, It is enough; Joseph my son is yet alive: I will go and see him before I die.

v21-28 All of Joseph's brothers take the wagons and provisions provided by Pharaoh and Joseph and return to Canaan, Joseph being particularly generous with his brother Benjamin (v. 21-25). They return back and tell Jacob everything, who initially doesn't believe them, but upon seeing all of the Egyptian donkeys and wagons, does believe them and he decides to go, mainly because he wants to see Joseph again (v. 26-28).

Naturally, the brothers fail to inform Jacob of all of the intervening details about how they initially planned on murdering Joseph, but instead threw him in a pit, and then he disappeared, so they lied to him when they gave him the bloodied coat.

v22 In 37:1-11 the preferential treatment shown to Joseph is what leads to the other brothers conspiring against him. Here, their youngest brother receives five-fold the gifts from Joseph, and it inspire no animus at all.

v24 "See that ye fall not out by the way", Joseph is telling them not to quarrel on the way back home. We would assume Joseph is telling them not to argue about whether they should emigrate from Canaan to Egypt or not, as what else would they be arguing about that was relevant to Joseph that he would counsel them against?

v26-28 Jacob's emotional rollercoaster goes to an extreme low and high in a very short time period. The reader would assume Jacob was in a state of worry the entire time Benjamin and the brothers were gone, and then to have news like this on top of their successful return would be overwhelming.

v26 "Jacob's heart fainted", Robert Alter comments:

Translations like "his heart fainted" (KJV), "his heart was numb" (NJPS), and "he was stunned" (REB) blunt the force of the original. The Hebrew verb plainly means to stop, or

more precisely, to intermit. Judah had warned that the loss of Benjamin would kill the old man. Now the tremendous shock of this news about Joseph, which at first he cannot believe—does he imagine his less-than-trustworthy sons are perpetrating a cruel hoax?—induces a physical syncope.

v28 "I will go and see him before I die", Jacob is old at this point (cf. 47:9), and traveling to Egypt is probably not what he wants to do, as it could literally kill him. But, his desire to see Joseph is enough reason for him to undertake and survive the trek.

For Jacob, his interests aren't about the land and family possessions left behind or the potential newfound wealth in emigrating to Egypt. The only thing he cares about at this point is seeing Joseph again before he dies.

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