



GENESIS 42-45 JOSEPH & HIS BROTHERS -- A LITERARY MASTERPIECE

The life of Joseph is a biblical “rags to riches” story, with this difference—he is not a “self-made man”—for it is *God* who was working all the events in his life so they would accomplish His purposes. It is God who gives Joseph the ability to interpret dreams, and especially Pharaoh’s dream. The Pharaoh is so impressed with this young, talented and discrete man that he appoints him to guide Egypt through the next critical 14 years, seven which will be of plenty, and seven of great scarcity.

Two possible dates for Joseph’s stay

A word about the chronology of that time. Conservative scholars are divided on two possible time periods, depending on whether there are 430 years from *the time of Joseph to the Exodus*, as Genesis 15:13, Exodus 12:40, and Acts 7:6 seem to mention, or whether it was just *four* generations, as Genesis 15:16 mentions.

We have traditionally explained that from Joseph to the Exodus is *215 years*, and the sojourn of 430 years includes the time *in Canaan and Egypt*, as can be adduced from Acts 13:19, in which 450 years are said to extend from the patriarchal period through the conquest of the promised land. Exodus 12:40 is ambiguous in the Hebrew, and the Septuagint Greek edition added a phrase to clarify the meaning, indicated here by italics: “The time that the sons of Israel, which dwelt in Egypt *and in the land of Canaan*, sojourned was 430 years.” Galatians 3:16-17 mention the 430 years cover the stay both in Egypt and Canaan, and so this shorter period of 215 years would put Joseph in the Hyksos age, when foreigners from the East ruled Egypt. A strong case can be made for either of the periods, but the 215 years does better explain the chronology back to Adam. It is one of the most disputed periods about the chronology of ancient Israel.

Joseph’s ten brothers descend to Egypt

Chapter 42 opens in the second year of the widespread drought. The Nile River, as well as the land of Canaan, depends upon the tropical rains that seasonally go through that area. Without it, the Nile significantly dwindles and does not annually overflow its banks. In Canaan, the situation is worse, for it does not have a large river going through the country, and they must use cisterns or

wells for drinking water and the rain for irrigation. An Egyptian Third Dynasty text says, “The Nile had *not come* in my time for a space of *seven years*. Grain was scant, fruits were dried up, and everything that they eat was short. Every man robbed his companion...” (Alfred Hoerth, *Archaeology and the New Testament*, p. 144).

Jacob watches the fields turn yellow, his flocks lose weight, and his grain stores disappear. There was hardly any grain left in Canaan, so all looked for relief in the abundant grain reserves of Egypt.

The Bible explains, “When Jacob saw that there was grain in Egypt, Jacob said to his sons, ‘Why do you look at one another?’ And he said, ‘Indeed I have heard that there is grain in Egypt, go down to that place and buy for us there, that we may live and not die. So Joseph’s ten brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. But Jacob did not send Joseph’s brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he said, ‘Lest some calamity befall him’” (Gen. 42:1-4). We see Jacob exercising his faith with action. Also he was still very protective of Benjamin, by now in his early 30’s, whom Jacob thought was the only remaining son he had by his beloved Rachel.

So they departed for Egypt. “Now Joseph was governor over the land and it was he who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph’s brothers came and bowed down before him with their faces to the earth. Joseph saw his brothers and recognized them, but he acted as a stranger to them and spoke roughly to them. Then he said to them, ‘Where do you come from?’ And they said, ‘From the land of Canaan to buy food.’ So Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. Then Joseph *remembered the dreams which he had dreamed about them*, and said, ‘You are spies! You have come to see the nakedness of the land!’ (42:6-9).

The brothers taste some of their own medicine

The dream had showed his family bowing before him, and now it had partly come true. Of course Joseph longed to reveal his identity to them, but first he had to find out what kind of men they had become. After all, they had tried to kill him and then sold him into slavery—a virtual death sentence. So he would teach them a lesson, find out who remained alive of the family, and how they had treated Benjamin, his only other full brother and the

one who had not participated in the plot against him. Joseph devised a plan to find out every important detail before giving himself away.

He first accuses them of being spies to see their reaction. They said, “We are all one man’s sons; we are honest men, your servants are not spies.” But he said to them, ‘No, but you have come to see the nakedness of the land.’ And they said, ‘Your servants are twelve brothers, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan; and in fact, the youngest is with our father today, and one is no more.’” (42:11-13).

So Joseph found out his father and Benjamin were still alive. He insists they were spies to have them feel in prison what being a captive and being cooped up in a hole had felt. He hopes their stay in prison would prick their consciences to what they had done to him some 22 years before. He said, “In this manner you shall be tested: By the life of Pharaoh, you shall not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here. Send one of you, and let him bring your brother, and *you shall be kept in prison*, that your words may be tested to see whether there is any truth in you; or else, by the life of the Pharaoh, surely you are spies! So he put them all together in prison three days” (42:15-17).

Being accused of spying meant a death sentence if guilty, and their stay in prison had the intended effect of stirring their consciences for their very evil act toward the then 17 year-old Joseph. “Then they said to one another, ‘We are truly guilty concerning our brother; for we saw the *anguish* of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear; therefore this distress has come upon us.’ And Reuben answered them, saying, ‘Did I not speak to you, saying, ‘Do not sin against the boy; and you would not listen? Therefore behold, his blood is now required of us.’”

They had spoken in Hebrew, and didn’t realize Joseph understood all they said. He couldn’t keep all of his emotions within him. “And he turned himself away from them and wept. Then he returned to them again, and talked with them. And he took Simeon from them and bound him before their eyes” (42:24-25). It seems Simeon, who had already showed a streak of cruelty by leading the slaying of the Shechemites (34:25) and was cursed by Jacob, had much to do with the conspiracy against Joseph. So it appears Joseph had him continue in prison while the rest were let go. There

he could contemplate the consequences of his errors.

Joseph plays a trick on them

Joseph added to the suspense by not accepting their money, but hiding it in their provisions. Probably he had intended his father to find this gift, but they inadvertently opened one of the sacks and saw the money, and all found the same thing in their sacks. “Then their hearts failed them and they were afraid, saying to one another, ‘What is this that God has done to us?’” They thought for sure they would now be accused by the Egyptians of robbery and not only of spying. They returned to Canaan deeply worried and recounted all that had happened to Jacob. “And Jacob their father said to them, ‘You have bereaved me: Joseph is no more, Simeon is no more, and you want to take Benjamin. All these things are against me’” (42:36).

Jacob’s initial reaction was not to let Benjamin go to Egypt, but the famine continued to get worst. “And it came to pass, when they had eaten up the grain which they had brought from Egypt, that their father said to them, ‘Go back, buy us a little food.’ But Judah spoke to him, saying, ‘The man solemnly warned us, saying, ‘You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you’” (43:2-3).

Reluctantly, Jacob concedes and Benjamin goes with them to Egypt. “So the men took that present and Benjamin, and they took double money in their hand, and arose and went down to Egypt; and they stood before Joseph. When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the steward of his house, ‘Take these men to my home, and slaughter an animal and make ready; for these men will dine with me at noon’” (43:15-16).

The brothers were afraid of going to Joseph’s home and thought it was a way to arrest them. But Joseph’s steward assured them they were safe and revealed Joseph had given orders to put the money in their bags. He then brought Simeon to them. Their heads must have been spinning. From expecting the worse, now they were being wined and dined. Joseph met Benjamin, his only full brother, and not able to keep the tears back, he excused himself to gain his composure and then returned. He seats them according to their age, which amazed them, and gives his beloved brother, Benjamin, five times more food than the rest. This Egyptian custom shows the historicity of the account. “So they set him a place by himself, and

them by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves; because the Egyptians could not eat food with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians” (43:32). Egyptian documents show that they regarded foreigners as inferior in culture to them and ritualistically impure. “Why did Joseph eat by himself?” asks *The Life Application Bible*. “He was following the laws of the Egyptians’ caste system. They considered themselves highly intelligent and sophisticated. They looked upon shepherds and nomads as uncultured and even vulgar. As a Hebrew, Joseph could not eat with Egyptians even though he outranked them. As foreigners and shepherds, his brothers were lower in rank than any Egyptian citizen, so they had to eat separately too” (p. 88).

Even if the brothers enjoyed a splendid dinner, their time of testing had not finished. Joseph had his men secretly place his silver cup in Benjamin’s sack, and then sent his brothers off back to Canaan brimming with food and presents.

But as they left the city, Joseph’s men arrived mentioning Joseph’s silver cup was missing. They all denied having taken it and declared whoever had done it would be put to death. To their dismay, the cup was found in Benjamin’s sack. “Then they tore their clothes, and each man loaded his donkey and returned to the city. So Judah and his brothers came to Joseph’s house, and he was still there; and they fell before him on the ground. And Joseph said to them, ‘What deed is this you have done? Did you not know that such a man as I can certainly practice divination?’” (44:13-15).

With respect to what Joseph said about this cup of divination, *Archaeology and the Old Testament* says, “Joseph himself never says that he used the cup for such an activity, but this possibility provide his brothers with an ‘explanation’ for some of the things that had been happening, like seating them by birth order at the banquet” (p. 153).

Then they all fell before him on the ground and Judah admits they are totally at Joseph’s mercy. He speaks privately to Joseph and explains how precious is Benjamin to his aged father and offers to become Joseph’s slave in his stead.

Joseph reveals himself to them

“Then Joseph could not restrain himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, ‘Make everyone go out from me!’ So no one stood with him while Joseph made himself known to his

brothers. And he wept aloud, and the Egyptians and the house of Pharaoh heard it. Then Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am Joseph; does my father still live?’ But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed in his presence. And Joseph said to his brothers, ‘Please come near to me.’ So they came near. Then he said, ‘I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. But now, do not therefore be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; *for God sent me before you to preserve life*. For these two years the famine has been in the land, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. *And God sent me before you to preserve a posterity for you in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance*. So now it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father, and say to him, ‘Thus says your son Joseph: ‘God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not tarry. You shall dwell in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near to me, you and your children, your children’s children, your flocks and your herds, and all that you have. There I will provide for you, lest you and your household, and all that you have, come to poverty...So you shall tell my father of all my glory in Egypt, and of all that you have seen; and you shall hurry and bring my father down here.’” (45:1-13).

His brothers were flabbergasted. What seemed a curse turns out for the best. When Pharaoh found out of this unexpected family reunion he was very pleased, for he owed Joseph so much. He graciously invited Joseph’s clan to settle in Goshen, just as Joseph had predicted. Then Joseph loaded them up with great bounty, and sent them on their way.

When they arrived, at first Jacob did not believe them, but seeing all the wealth and hearing their account, he finally was convinced and “the spirit of Jacob their father revived” (45:27). They then began preparing for their great journey to live in a new land that God had ready for them.