

OpenTheo

The Family of Abraham: Part 35—Joseph Reveals Himself to His Brothers

May 6, 2019



Alastair Roberts

I discuss Genesis 45, as Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and Jacob discovers that his son is alive.

My blog for my podcasts and videos is found here: <https://adversariapodcast.com/>. You can see transcripts of my videos here: <https://adversariapodcast.com/list-of-videos-and-podcasts/>.

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account: <https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

If you have enjoyed these talks, please tell your friends and consider supporting me on Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>. You can also support me using my PayPal account: <https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>.

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Welcome back to this, the 35th in my series on the story of the family of Abraham. Today we're looking at chapter 45 of the book of Genesis, where Joseph, in the moment that we have all been waiting for, is finally revealed to his brothers. This event follows the impassioned plea of Judah for Benjamin, his brother, that Benjamin is the son of the favored wife, and he is the son of the unfavored wife, that he is the son that his father has more or less disowned, but Benjamin is the son that his favored does not trouble Judah.

Judah steps into the breach and intercedes for Benjamin, his brother. And in this event,

we see the unworking, the unraveling of so much of the sin of chapter 37. And in this chapter, we have the outworking of the consequences.

As Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, and relationships are restored. Joseph sends everyone out at this point. This is immediately following the speech of Judah.

And he can't restrain himself. He sends everyone out, and no one else is there. And it's just Joseph and his brothers.

We've seen throughout these chapters that there are significant movements. So Joseph, at certain points, goes away from his brothers, distances himself from his brothers. He eats separately from his brothers.

He goes into his private chambers to weep away from his brothers. But now everyone else is sent out, and it's just him and his brothers. This is a noteworthy change in the ordering of groups.

At many other times, there's been a separation between the brothers and Joseph. Or Joseph has had other people around him as he's dealt with the brothers. Or he's affiliated primarily with the Egyptians.

Now, however, he speaks to them directly. He speaks to them just as brothers. They're united just as a group of the 12 brothers.

Finally, they're all brought together. And he weeps aloud. As I've noted before, as we go through the story of Jacob and Joseph, weeping occurs at these significant moments, these moments that stand out, these moments where your heart, as it were, skips a beat, and you're wondering what's going to happen, or these moments where there are these powerful reunions of people, these moments of weeping and tragedy and devastation.

And here again, we have a moment of weeping. The story of Joseph towards the end is full of weeping. It's a very poignant and emotional tale, particularly this chapter.

It's a very moving story. When you think about the human dimensions of this, the brother that seemed lost, the brother who had been betrayed but yet forgives, it is a story that is deeply moving. And it's unsurprising that it has so captured the imagination of many people in the years since.

The emphasis throughout Joseph's speech is upon the question of does his father still live? Judah has already mentioned the father 14 times. And yet throughout Joseph's speech, he's concentrated on his father. He reveals himself to be Joseph.

And the first thing that he asks, is my father still alive? This is the concern that this greater reunion should occur. The father who sent him out, he wants to be reunited,

rejoined with the father that he was separated from. And his brother is so dismayed and shocked and surprised by his revelation, can't answer him initially.

And then he tells him to come near to him. And he repeats, I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold in Egypt. Now, as Wenham and others have observed, many of the text critical approaches to this text will point, source critical approaches will point out that you have this repetition.

So maybe one should be assigned to one source and another to another. And they totally miss the emotional force of what's taking place. And just the human dimensions that these people can't grasp the fact that this is Joseph just through shock and amazement.

And so he repeats it again, not because they're two sources, but because it's such a powerful emotional moment. And when you're so detached from the text and the emotional movement of what's taking place, you're asking all the wrong questions. You need to pay attention to the place that everyone's in, how emotional this is for Joseph, what it means for him, what it means for the brothers, all the thoughts that will go be going through their head at this time.

Think about them, that they are in this position of they've been shown remarkable favour. And then it all seemed to be turned against them as Benjamin was caught with the silver cup and then Judah intercedes. And then there's this sending away of everyone and this brother they presumed dead, this brother they presumed lost in slavery, but probably dead.

He reveals himself to them and he's not just any old person on the street. He is the person who's ruling over Egypt under Pharaoh. How are they supposed to process this? This is the person that they've been seeing as the antagonist for all the last few chapters, this person they've been struggling against.

And then he's their brother. And this weeping and this emotional reunion is something that obviously they're going to struggle to process it. And it takes a couple of times for Joseph to actually get through to them.

And Joseph stresses the fact in the verses that follow in a fourfold statement that this is about divine action, that God has been involved throughout the story. This is something that comes out in the dreams and the interpretations that Joseph can see it. Key moments like when his brothers bow to him, that this isn't really the action of men.

This isn't just chance. This is divine purpose unfolding. God has a plan in all of this.

And so he says, but God sent me before you to preserve life. You sold me here, but God sent you before me to before you to preserve life. And again, God sent me before you to preserve a posterity for you in the earth and to save your lives by great deliverance.

And then again, 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. And then again, thus says your son, Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt and come down to me.

Do not tarry. And as you look at all of this, you see that he has a profound sense of God's agency within all of this. God's providence as we read through the story of Joseph, there's not great instances of divine miracles.

There aren't great instances of visions and and direct word of God. Joseph doesn't really seem to have that. He has dreams.

What he does see is God speaking to him in the course of his life, the way that God is overruling and ordering events for his purpose, for his salvation of this family. And that recognition is one that really inspires Joseph. Now, Jacob is someone who has visions.

Jacob is someone who is visited by the angel on a number of occasions and has that sort of dealing with God. Joseph doesn't. Joseph has dreams.

And in Joseph's story, we're seeing a deeper understanding of God's involvement in history, of God's orchestration of history. And the way he speaks about this, he can give forgiveness to the brothers, not hold their sin against them, because he recognizes a higher hand in history. Ultimately, it is not about them, but about God who sent him before them in order that he might bring a great salvation.

Reading through this, then you have a realization of how the doctrine of providence, a strong doctrine of providence, can help you to forgive people, can help you to be someone who does not hold grudges. That you recognize that the course of your life is not ultimately in the hand of the people who will you harm, but in the hand of God who overrules all. And that can give you incredible assurance when people are arrayed against you, that even when everything seems to go wrong, as it seemed to go wrong in the story of Joseph, you can trust yourself to God's hand, knowing that he will be the one that preserves you, that he will bring things to the end that he has determined, no matter what the intention of your adversaries.

This is a God who acts and rules in history. And when we're learning about God, we're learning about God within a story of human characters where God is not a prominent figure. You don't see God on the surface of the story.

But yet all this story is about God. And one of the things that we do see within these connections that I highlight throughout is traces of divine handiwork, these patterns, the way that God's signature is on events. And you recognize these symmetries and you think there's another hand here.

This is not just chance. This is not just human work. This is not just the contrivance of

Joseph that certain events should mirror others.

God is involved here. And God's involvement brings about his purpose. That sense of divine action and a God who rules over history is front and center within the Joseph narrative.

So it's telling us something about who God is. And what's happening here is also a summing up of the entire story. You wonder what the story is about.

It's about God doing something. It's not about ultimately a rivalry between brothers. It is about that.

And that level of the story is very important. God is transforming this family, dealing with this family and teaching them faith, teaching them what it means to relate to each other in a proper way, to atone for what they have done in the past. It is a story in which we see the faith of sacrificing the son and then the son restored.

What it means to have a child of promise. What it means to be a people defined by promise. What it means for the favoured sons to serve the less favoured and for the less favoured to honour the favoured sons and for them not to be rivals but to be at peace.

So it sums up the entire story. But it also is something that can help the brothers to resolve their differences. So not just summing up the story for the reader, but as Joseph sees the shape of his story and as the brothers see the shape of the story, that enables them to defuse their rivalry.

That no longer are they the primary protagonist within the story. Rather, God is. And as God is seen in that way, that enables them to resolve their differences.

They can talk truly about what they have done and what they have done wrong. But yet that greater hand allows for them to no longer hold it against each other because it is no longer the determining factor, the all determining factor that might formerly have seemed to be. In verses 1 to 16, there is a large chiasm at the very centre of it.

There's Joseph's instruction to his brothers to hasten and tell his father the good news. The good news that he is not just alive, but he is lord of all of Egypt. He also, at the end of this time period, he weeps with Benjamin.

And his weeping with Benjamin, I think, is a bridge to his other brothers. He first weeps with Benjamin and then he is united to other brothers. Benjamin is that nearest brother.

Earlier on in the previous chapter, we see Judah's account of his father's feelings concerning Benjamin. He says that his brother is dead and he alone is left of his mother's children. And then he cannot leave his father.

And Rabbi David Foreman has suggested maybe there's some sort of a weak allusion

here to the story of Genesis chapter 2, the man who's alone, the man who cannot leave his father. And here we have a reunion of the one flesh of the two brothers, the two brothers from the same mother and father. And that reunion allows for Benjamin no longer to be alone and Benjamin to leave his father and go out into the world in a new way.

Maybe that's going on. I think possibly it's there. I'm inclined to see it there with him.

Benjamin can now leave his father and the story can progress. The reunion here is similar to that between Esau and Jacob in chapter 33, where there is a very powerful and emotional meeting. And in that chapter, we read, Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him and they wept.

And here we have, then he fell on his brother Benjamin's neck and wept and Benjamin wept on his neck. These stories, I think, are connected in various ways. It's all about the legacy of Jacob and that rivalry with his brother.

And then also what it means for Rachel. Is Rachel and her legacy going to be protected? Are the beautiful children, as it were, of the beautiful mother going to be preserved? Or are they going to be completely devoured by the others? No, we find that they are interceded for by Judah intercedes for Benjamin. And now all the brothers can join together.

So first with Benjamin and then he kisses, kisses all his brothers and weeps over them. And so there's Benjamin first and then the rest of the brothers. And then they talk with him.

That might seem a bit anticlimactic. You've got to this point and all these emotional events taking place and weeping and kissing and these great revelations of Joseph's identity and his yearning for his father and his heart going out to Benjamin. And then they talk together.

It just seems so anticlimactic. But if you look back at the beginning of the story of Joseph, you'll see why. Joseph brings a bad report about his brothers.

And then Israel loves Joseph more than all his other children. And then he makes him a coat of many colors. And his brothers see that his father loves him more and is favored that he favors him above all of them.

And then they hated him and they could not speak peaceably to him. That's very at the very heart of the beginning of this antagonism between Joseph and his brothers that they cannot speak peaceably together. And then it just piles up from that.

And here we see they speak together. And that brings that antagonism to a close. Finally, they're on peaceable terms.

They can speak together. And that brings us back to that point where everything went wrong. Everything started to spiral out of control.

And now it's being set right. They speak together. And the report is shared in Pharaoh's house.

He hears that Joseph's brothers have come and he is pleased as are his servants. And so he instructs them to load their beasts and depart and go back to the land of Canaan and to bring their father and their households and come to Pharaoh. And they'll be given the best of the land of Egypt.

They'll eat the fat of the land and they don't have to worry about anything that they have to leave behind. They'll be provided for bountifully within the land of Egypt. They'll have the best of the land and the fruits of the land and all of the land of Egypt is put before them.

Then they follow the instructions of Pharaoh. And Joseph gives them the carts according to Pharaoh's command. And he gives them provisions on the journey.

Changes of garment. But to Benjamin, he gives 300 pieces of silver and five changes of garment. 300 pieces of silver.

I'm not sure why that is the case. Why 300? Is there some sort of connection with the Ark? Perhaps in the chapter that follows, I think there are a number of Ark references, which I'll get into tomorrow. I think the five changes of garment probably associated with kingship.

Perhaps. Again, there's some degree of restitution here. When we think back at the story of Joseph, Joseph is sold for pieces of silver and the pieces of silver are still part of the story here.

That he was sold. And now there is a restitution to the son of the favoured side of the family after the sin of the unfavoured side. What else might be going on here? Maybe it's related to the ten brothers.

The ten brothers of the other wives that they each, there's 30 pieces of silver associated with each one of them. Perhaps. I don't know.

I'm speculating at this point. I really do not have a clue. But if any of you have any suggestions on this and many other things, I'd love to hear them in the comments.

I want to have a conversation about these texts. I don't have all the answers by any means. And I've thoroughly enjoyed some of the interactions I've had in the comments and then also an email, emails and other things like that.

His brothers talk with him. There is this provision of pieces, pieces of silver and changes

of garment. And they are sent with ten donkeys loaded with good things of Egypt and ten female donkeys loaded with grain, bread and food for his father on the journey.

Again, I'm not sure why it's mentioned that it's ten donkeys and ten female donkeys. There are often patterns to these things. And we've seen that on several occasions within the story of Genesis.

I don't see the pattern here. I'm quite possibly missing something. Donkeys are associated with the story of Benjamin at various points.

That might be part of it. Other things that there's pairings. There's ten of each.

There's ten female and ten male donkeys. Maybe there's a Noah theme taking place here again. Again, we have the story of the kingdom associated with searching for donkeys and being told that donkeys have been found and being sent with donkeys in the story of David.

Again, that may be going on here. I'm really not sure. And if you have any idea whatsoever, please share it with me.

I'd love to know. Then they go out of the land of Egypt and come to the land of Canaan to Jacob, their father. And they told him, saying, Joseph is still alive and he is governor over all the land of Egypt.

And Jacob's heart stood still because he could not believe them. You can imagine being told Joseph is still alive. I mean, that's taking that in.

His heart was so bound up with the life of Joseph and with his brother, Benjamin, that to hear that at that moment when he thinks that Benjamin might be lost as well, that he has not just had Benjamin and Simeon returned to him, but Joseph as well. How can you process that emotionally within one moment? His heart misses a beat. He just can't process it.

It's such amazing news. But it's not just that Joseph is alive. He's ruler over the whole of Egypt.

And Jacob's heart stood still because he did not believe them. Now, not believing him at this point, maybe it's not that he thinks that, just thinks that they're liars. It's just he can't process.

It's incredible, literally. It's news that is beyond imagining. And to actually process this news takes more imagination than most people can summon up.

But then when they tell him all the words which Joseph had said to them, and when he saw the carts which Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of Jacob their father revived. So they hear his words, but they also have a symbol. They have symbols of his words, all

the carts that he has sent.

And so as they see all these, as Jacob sees all these treasures that are sent with them, he has a demonstration, a proof of the truth of what they have said. And Israel said, again, Israel. It shifts from Jacob, Jacob the solitary father whose heart is being brought down to the grave in sorrow, who seems to be separated from both of his favourite sons, whose loved wife has died, and seems to be alone in the world.

Now his spirit revives, and he is Israel once more, the patriarch, the head of the family, the leader of the clan, the one who will be the head of a great new nation. This is Israel now once more. It is enough.

Joseph, my son, is still alive. I will go down and see him before I die. I will go down.

And that connection with death. I will go down to my grave in mourning to my son Joseph. And now I will go down and see him before I die.

These are very similar statements, but they're completely reversed in their tone. And as we read this, I think we should see that this is the finishing point of a great Binding of Isaac style story. We saw at the beginning as Jacob sends out Joseph in chapter 37 that it's similar to a Binding of Isaac story.

It's the Binding of Isaac. It's the story of the sending out of Ishmael, Ishmael being sent out, exiled from the family. But as Jacob sends out his son Joseph, seemingly angry and sending him on a dangerous mission, it might seem that the father and son are separated completely, never to be united again.

And throughout the story, there is this question, will the father and son ever be united? We have that reunion with the brothers, with Benjamin most particularly, but with the other brothers. And now it's coming to that deepest reunion of all, the reunion with the father. And it's again, it's a large story of the Binding of Isaac.

If you look in chapter 46 at the very beginning, Israel takes a journey. He comes to Beersheba. Where is Beersheba? It's where Abraham goes out from in the Binding of Isaac.

It's where Abraham goes back to after the Binding of Isaac. And he says, God appears to Israel and says, Jacob, Jacob, calls to him. And the response of Jacob, here I am.

These key words that summon up the memory of the Binding of Isaac story. And also the sending out of Joseph in chapter 37. In chapter 37, it said, Israel said to Joseph, are not your brothers feeding the flock in Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.

So he said to him, here I am. And this story has been playing out all the time. And now finally, the spirit of Israel revives.

That spirit reviving, it's coming back to life. He is as if one who has been dead. He's been a living dead person for all these years, for over 22 years now.

He's been living dead. He's been going down to the grave. He's been this bereaved father that's never been able to overcome this sense of tragic loss of his wife and of his son, Joseph.

And now his spirit revives and he comes alive again. And this is the conclusion in many respects. And the reunion that follows is the conclusion of this great big Binding of Isaac story.

And now it will be a different thing. No longer will it be a case of this son being distanced from him, taken from his hand. Now, this son will place his hands upon his eyes and let him depart in peace.

This is a story that is moving, a grand story that has moved through so much and now is coming around full circle. Returning us to the point where everything went wrong and restoring things that we thought we could never have. This is a story that is so powerful precisely because we see that it's something that exceeds human action.

It's something that exceeds human design. It reveals the work of God in restoring history that seems to be broken, lives that seem to have been shattered beyond repair. The things that we have given up that we thought we'd never have returned to us and those things that we never hoped to obtain.

It's a story of God's providence in history, a providence that I believe is a foreshadowing of the greater eschatological work of God. When the new heavens and the new earth, God will restore to us, God will fulfill for us. All the brokenness of our history will be repaired.

All the things that we have lost will be restored. All the things that seem to have failed will be successful. They will reach their conclusion, not through human endeavour, not through human ingenuity, not through human providence, but through divine goodness and grace.

This story is one that has so much power and is constantly returned to by the people of God very much for this reason. It's one that has an emotional power on a human level. But beyond that, we see the hand of God at work and it's something that gives us confidence beyond anything else.

Thank you very much for listening. Lord willing, you are having a good day. If you would like to support this and other podcasts like it, please do so using my Patreon or PayPal account.

If you have any questions for me on this or anything else, please do leave them on my

Curious Cat account. And again, leave comments, leave any thoughts that you might have on this passage. Things that I've missed, things that you'd like for me to comment on in future passages.

Thank you very much. God bless.