

OpenTheo

The Family of Abraham: Part 33—Returning to Egypt with Benjamin

May 3, 2019



Alastair Roberts

Genesis 43: Joseph's brothers return to Egypt with Benjamin.

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 33rd in my series on the story of the family of Abraham. Today we're looking at chapter 43 of the book of Genesis, which concerns the second visit of the brothers of Joseph down to Egypt, this time accompanied by Benjamin. They meet with Joseph there and they have a meal with him.

It's interesting to notice that once again within the book of Genesis, we're seeing a slowing down of the pace of the narrative. As we've gone through the book of Genesis, much of what we've been reading has been moving at a fairly steady pace. And there are a few points where things slow down.

From chapter 17 to the middle of chapter 21, the events take place all within a year. And

here again we see between chapters 43 and 45, there is a slowing down of the pace of the narrative. Within this period of time, we have a very brief window of time covered with a great deal of text.

Even the speeches and other things within this text are extended longer than we might expect them to be. There's a lot of time and attention given to this. When we think about the book of Genesis, it is important to consider the pace at which things move and how long we labour over particular details.

For instance, if we look at chapter 24 with the first encounter with Rebecca, there is a lot of space given to details of the journey. And the encounter with Rebecca by the servant of Abraham, him recounting the events. Now, why is all of that space given to it? It seems to me that the author of Genesis is someone who can write things fairly briefly when he has to.

But on occasions, he gives a lot of attention, an almost novelistic attention to fine details, to the details of dialogue, things like that. Why is it that he focuses upon these particular parts of the story and not others? Why when he could just say they said such and such to him, just recounted their story, why does he go into the full speech? Why on other occasions does he just gloss over all of that? These are questions that we need to ask when we reach a chapter like this, where there is a slowing down of the pace of the narrative. Within this section, we're facing this situation, the famine is severe in the land still.

And this is something that's introduced earlier on in chapter 41. And then it's also something that's mentioned in chapter 12 when Abraham first goes down to Egypt. So the severity of the famine maybe draws our mind back to the first visit of Abraham to Egypt.

The severity of the famine leads Jacob to suggest that his sons go back to Egypt to buy some more food. But Judah reminds Jacob that there's a problem. The man in charge of the Egyptian provision of food has said that they should not come back unless they're accompanied by their youngest brother, Benjamin.

And of course, Jacob is none too happy with this idea. And Israel said, why do you deal so wrong wrongfully with me as to tell the man whether you had still another brother? And they respond, well, he was asking us all these things about us being spies and whether father was still alive, whether we had another brother, etc. So whether or not actually Joseph did ask those questions to them, it seems that he was eliciting that sort of information from them within the previous chapter.

He wanted to discover what he could about them and they needed to clear their name. And so they wanted to be as forthcoming as possible about the details of their clan. It's a problem that they had to address.

And giving this information about Benjamin and the father was one of the ways in which they could address it. And so they need to bring Benjamin down. We've already had the offer of Reuben to have his two sons killed if he does not return Benjamin safely.

And Jacob does not respond to that. He does not send Benjamin down. Reuben, the firstborn, again, fails with words.

Reuben is someone who seeks to persuade with words earlier on. And he's someone who really can't stop the brothers from sending Joseph down to slavery. He isn't persuasive and he has to rely upon a plot that fails, a plan that fails to release Joseph before the other brothers get there.

And it seems that Reuben just is doomed to failure. He's not someone who really has the gift of persuasion. Judah, on the other hand, speaks up at this point and says that he will be the one who offers surety for Benjamin.

Send the lad with me and we will arise and go that we may live and not die, both we and you and also our little ones. As we read this story, it's worth thinking again about the themes of sacrifice of the son, sacrifice of the beloved son. As we've gone through the story of Abraham, we've seen this playing out on a number of occasions.

He loses Lot. Lot goes away and then Lot seems to come back. But then Lot is lost completely.

Ishmael is lost. Isaac seems to be lost. He's sacrificed and then he's brought back.

He's, God provides a substitute. We see Jacob being lost, as it were, to his mother and that antagonism between the two brothers that needs to be resolved. And then we see it in the story of Joseph.

And then Simeon is lost. And now Benjamin has to be sent. This is the third son that Jacob stands to lose.

Now, as we've looked through the story so far, we've seen something that should remind us of this. In the story of chapter 38, Judah loses two sons and then has to give the third son to Tamar, this threatening figure who seems to have taken two sons already. Jacob has lost two sons to Egypt.

He doesn't know that Joseph has gone down to Egypt, but he has lost two sons seemingly there. Joseph and now Simeon. And it seems that he might lose Benjamin too.

So sending Benjamin with them is a matter of considerable concern. It is something that has echoes of the Achaeta story, the binding of Isaac, just as the story of Joseph has echoes of that story and echoes also of the story of Ishmael being sent away. Here we have those themes playing out again.

There is an ominous departure, the sending of the son. Now, in the story of Judah, we saw that the two sons were lost and then two sons were restored at the end as Tamar bore Perez and Zerah. And I think we'll see a similar thing taking place here.

As Benjamin is sent by Jacob, he will be returned and along with him, Joseph and Simeon. He sends them down and described as Israel at this point. He's the head of the clan.

He's a bit more of a political name of his rule. He's not just Jacob, the individual, the suffering father. He's Israel, the head of the clan.

And he listens to Judah. Judah is persuasive. In the same way as Judah was persuasive with the brothers in chapter 37, Judah is persuasive here.

And here he's offering himself a surety for the son of Rachel. There is a reversal to some degree of the previous situation where he covered up the loss of Joseph and he suggested selling Joseph into slavery. Now he is going to serve a surety for the son, Benjamin.

He is sent or they are sent with some of the best fruits of the land, some of the strength of the land in their vessels that they carry down as a present for the man. A little balm, a little honey, spices and myrrh, pistachio nuts and almonds. Double money in your hand and take back in your hand the money that was returned in the mouth of your sacks.

Perhaps it was an oversight. Now there's a sevenfold gift here. Balm, honey, spices, myrrh, pistachios, almonds and the silver.

And this is a fullness of a gift, but it's also something that reminds us of chapter 37. In chapter 37, we see a caravan, trading caravan going down to Egypt of the Ishmaelites. And they come from Gilead with their camels bearing spices, balm and myrrh.

So they are being sent down to Egypt in a way that is very reminiscent of the way that their brother was sent down to Egypt in that trading caravan. There is the strength of the land, double money and the favoured son being sent down. Maybe these are firstborn themes that here we have Benjamin who's being treated in many ways as the first firstborn.

As we go through this, we'll see that there is still an element of disowning the brothers by Jacob. And may God Almighty give you mercy before the man that he may release your other brother and Benjamin. Your other brother is like a mother speaking about a child that's causing trouble to her husband and saying, your son's causing issues again.

Now it's both their son, but there's a sort of disowning taking place there. And sometimes it's generally in jest, but here it does not seem to be in jest. As we've seen in the previous chapter, there is a breach in the family that has grown very, very broad that Jacob no longer truly recognises the sons of Leah and the handmaids as his full children.

He says, my son shall not go down with you for his brother is dead. Not your brother, his brother. And he is left alone.

If any calamity should befall him along the way in which you go, then you would bring down my grey hair with sorrow to the grave. And there again, we see that there is this deep breach between Jacob and his sons. He speaks to them as if they were not truly his sons, as if Benjamin was not truly their brother too.

This breach in the family between Leah and Rachel has now spread to include Jacob on the side of Rachel. We might also think about the story of Esau and Jacob, where Jacob has to divide his family and send them and send on gifts ahead. And also he has to divide his family in a way that he will not have to give up Rachel.

Rachel is last. He's divided them into groups with the handmaids and then with Leah and then with Rachel, last of all with Joseph. And now he is sending Benjamin.

Benjamin, the one that he wanted to keep to last, the one that he wanted to preserve, he has to give over all of his sons. This is the last son that he would want to give up. But he's the one that's demanded of him.

So there's a sort of playing out of the sacrifice of the son theme again. But we're seeing Jacob having to give up the two sons that he depended most upon. We saw it in chapter 37, giving up Joseph, sending out Joseph.

And then here, that second son of Rachel is required of him. The son that he wanted to keep back till last. Or Rachel and her sons that he tried to keep back till last in his encounter with Esau.

Now he has to send him and he has no chance, no choice but to just depend upon divine providence. So he sends the strength of the land with the best fruits, double money and the favoured son in a way that's reminiscent of the Ishmaelite trading caravan. And the brothers perhaps are in a position that they are being sent down to Egypt.

They don't really have much choice in the matter. They have to go. They need to get food and they don't know what awaits them.

So maybe they're in a position like Joseph too. There is restitution being made here. They are sending back the silver that was received for the sale of Joseph.

Now, I don't believe that they received that money, but it was the money that was paid for Joseph. They are being sent down in a similar way to Joseph, in a way that's reminiscent of the trading caravan that Joseph went down with. And there is the return of your other brother that they're hoping for.

Now, Jacob says that he's looking for the return of your other brother. He means Simeon,

but it also could mean Joseph. When Joseph sees them arrive, he sees Benjamin with them and that changes everything.

He takes the course of action that he does in part because he sees Benjamin with them. For all he knew beforehand, they had killed Benjamin too. They had completely usurped his side of the family.

But no, they hadn't. Benjamin was brought with them and so they were not as wicked as he might have thought. He sees Benjamin and then he returns Simeon to them and they talk with his steward.

So there seems to be two particular encounters. He's probably seen them from a distance at this point and not yet having direct dealings with them. And then later on, he speaks to the steward of his house and then tells them to bring them to the house to slaughter an animal, make it ready, and that they will dine with him at noon.

And then the steward of his house deals with them from that point until later they encounter him. Within the encounter between them, he lifts up his eyes and he sees Benjamin. And there is a description there.

The lifting up of eyes is a very powerful description. It's something that we find is not something that's significant by itself. But when we think when that expression occurs, it is a very poignant and powerful expression.

It's something that we see when Abraham sees the place that he's going to have to sacrifice Isaac. It's what we see when Abraham lifts up his eyes and sees the ram in the thicket. Isaac lifts up his eyes and sees Rebecca.

Rebecca lifts up her eyes and sees Isaac. Jacob and Esau lift up their eyes to see each other. And the brothers lift up their eyes to see the Ishmaelites going down to Egypt.

In all of these cases, we have very significant encounters, encounters that are destined to lead to very important outcomes. And so when Joseph lifts up his eyes and sees Benjamin, there is a similar thing playing out here. That Benjamin is someone who's significant, that the story is taking a turn, that some key moment has been reached.

Joseph sees Benjamin, but Benjamin doesn't recognize him. One recognizes, the other does not. And that asymmetry of recognition is important within the Joseph narrative.

Within the Joseph narrative, they failed to recognize him, his weeping and his anguish. And now they fail to recognize him as he acts in power towards them. Benjamin is described as his brother, his mother's son.

These sorts of expressions might recall the way that we see Abraham describing, or Abraham's relationship with Isaac described. The Isaac is someone who's described in

these terms that heighten the sense of the strength of the relationship between the two. That he's the beloved son, that he's his only son, that he's the one that his whole legacy depends upon.

And in the same way, the tightness of the bond between Benjamin and Joseph is stressed at this point. Benjamin is all that remains to Joseph of his mother. Benjamin is the one that Joseph loves and cares about deeply.

His heart yearns for him. And he's the one that represents his whole continued stake in that family. It's the one thing that ties him to that family.

He feels maybe that his brothers have completely abandoned him, completely abandoned him and threw him away, exiled him from the family. But he still feels that kinship with Benjamin. For all he knows, Jacob sent him to be destroyed by his brothers.

Jacob was angry with him as a result of his second dream, seemingly. And then he sends him out to his brothers who don't speak peaceably to him, who are angry with him and envious of him. So it's not surprising that the brothers might seek to destroy him.

He doesn't send word back to Jacob at any point. And so perhaps we might think that he's wondering whether Jacob sold him into slavery, whether his brothers were involved too. The one brother he knows is innocent is Benjamin.

And Benjamin is the brother that his heart yearns for. It's still his tie to the family. When he sees Benjamin, I imagine that that gives him a sense of Jacob's position as well, that Jacob would be reluctant to send Benjamin.

It's not just a ploy to disguise the fact that Benjamin has been done away with. No, it's because Jacob truly and deeply cares for Benjamin, which suggests that maybe Jacob was not willing his destruction or his sale into Egypt. That maybe gives him some insight into his father's part in the matter.

Is this your younger brother of whom you spoke to me? And he said, God be gracious to you, my son. Speaking to Benjamin as a man in power to subordinates, but in a way that's reminiscent of the blessing of the priests. It's God's blessing upon this son, this son that is his brother and his mother's son.

That relationship with his mother and the fact that Benjamin represents to him his tie with his mother, I think is worth noting at this point. Rachel is still playing a part in the story. Benjamin stands for Rachel.

He's the one that Rachel died giving birth to, and we'll see her part in the story continuing in the next chapter. Joseph disguises his true emotions, but he weeps. He weeps in his response to seeing Benjamin.

As we've seen in the previous chapter, he's wept already. When he sees his brothers and specifically when he hears Reuben speak about the brother's guilt. That he recognizes that memory of what happened to him, what the brothers did to him.

And also some sense of how they feel about it, that it's created anguish for them too. That they recognize something of the evil that they have done. And as we look through the story of Genesis, we can see key occasions of weeping.

In the story of Jacob, it's very important. There are three key occasions of weeping. Esau weeps in despair when he loses the birthright.

Jacob weeps when he meets Rachel. And then Esau and Jacob weep together when they finally encounter each other in chapter 33. There is a progression here.

Weeping separated from each other and then weeping together. In the story of Joseph, we see similar progressions. There is a progression from the two times when Joseph weeps alone.

Weeps at a distance from his brothers, hides his weeping from his brothers. We've seen in the story of Joseph that his anguish is hidden from his brothers. That he's in the pit and weeping and shouting for help.

And his brothers go away to eat a meal. They eat bread together. That he's at a distance, presumably away from his cries.

Much as Hagar sought to escape the cries of Ishmael. That distance that is created between the brothers and Joseph is still not closed. He disguises his weeping from them.

They do not yet see. There is a significance to him serving bread at this point. I mentioned that in chapter 37, they go to a distance and then they have bread together.

They have to be at some sort of distance for the Midianites to pull Joseph up and sell him to the Ishmaelites. But it seems that at this point here, there is a distance created again that is reminiscent of that. They eat bread and Joseph eats separately from them.

Now, all these sorts of details that we find within the text, are they just there for a sort of novelistic or historical verisimilitude? I don't think they are. I think they're there because we're supposed to see within them something of significance. That this is reminiscent of what happened earlier.

That just as Joseph was placed at a distance from his brothers, and they could not see his weeping and his anguish there. So there's another instance of weeping here and another instance of the brothers eating bread and Joseph being separated from them at a distance. This story is still playing out.

That distance has still not been closed. Joseph goes into his inner chamber earlier and he

weeps privately. There might be a sort of quasi liturgical pattern here.

That Joseph sets things up for a sacrifice, for the killing of an animal, preparing of a meal. It's a sort of sacrificial pattern perhaps. They meet with the steward, the household servant, in palace servant in the courtyard.

Again, a priest figure relative to the house of Joseph. And then there is confession. They confess what happened with the silver put in their bags.

And then a recognition of their forgiveness. They wash, their feet are washed, and then they have a fellowship meal. It seems to be a sort of approach of sacrifice.

And Jacob or Joseph goes into the inner chamber by himself and washes. And maybe there are some priestly themes here to explore. He orders them by age, but then he singles out Benjamin for special treatment.

So ordering them by age, it would seem that once you've ordered them by age, the natural thing to do is if you're going to show any special treatment, you show it to the oldest, to Reuben. Now, he knows the age and they maybe are thinking, is he showing divination here, his power of divination? That he is someone who has the power of divination and he knows the identity of the brothers. He knows things about them that maybe they have not disclosed to him.

Do they know about Joseph? Do they know about the true character of what we did to that other son that is no more? Now, when he puts them in that order and then singles out Benjamin for special treatment, that singling out of Benjamin has a greater significance than it would have otherwise. Benjamin is given fivefold and five times as much as anything that they have in their servings. Benjamin is being given a special treatment, much as Joseph was, despite Joseph not being the firstborn.

Joseph was not the firstborn. And think about all the order of the sons and yet this favoured son, some way down the line, it seems wrong and the other sons rebel against that. Now, he's treating Benjamin in a similar way.

He's created the distance between them and him, between Joseph is sitting at a distance from them while they eat bread. And now he's given special treatment. As if the story is going to play out again, how will they treat this other son of Rachel if he is given special treatment? What happens? Will they treat him in the same way as they treated Joseph? Or will they care for him? Will they show that they have changed in their character? Looking through the story then, I think that there are a number of themes to pay attention to.

There's the way that the story is playing out again. The story of the brothers sitting at a distance. The story of being sent down to Egypt with the caravan train.

The story of the two sons that have seemingly been lost and the third son having to be sent to return. The treatment of the son that's younger down the line, the favoured son that is not in fact the firstborn. And as we follow these themes, I think we'll see in the following chapters that they will reveal much of the significance of this text.

There is a great deal taking place here. As I've commented already, there is a sort of musical chairs being established partly by the contrivance of Joseph but partly also by the providence of God. That people who were in one position in a previous iteration of the narrative are now being placed in a different position.

Will they respond in a righteous way? Or will they repeat the faults that they once performed? Or when they are put in the position that they put someone else in, will they be able to redeem their story? This is a question that hangs over the entire narrative. These are stories that have been playing on for quite some time. It's the story of Rachel and the death sentence that was passed upon her at the time when the terraphine was stolen.

It's the story of Esau and Jacob and the blessing and the birthright. It's the story of the meeting of Esau and Jacob later. It's the story of the rivalry between Leah and Rachel.

All these stories are playing out in the next generation. And at this sort of point, we're seeing some of the resolutions starting to emerge. Judah, the son that led the conspiracy and the plot to disguise the death of Joseph is now acting as surety for the other son of Rachel.

There's a shift in the narrative. Something has changed. A corner has been turned.

And as we follow things further, we'll see that God is at work in this situation too. That God is bringing about some of the resolution of the deeper themes that have been playing throughout the entirety of the book or the book of Genesis and the story of Abraham and his family. Following these themes, we will have a deeper sense, I believe, of the way that God works with people, with families, not just as detached individuals, but as networks of relationships where the actions of one person have ramifications for other people that they are connected to, have ramifications for the next generation, and reverberate down through the centuries.

This story is one that is charged with destiny. The relationship between Judah and Benjamin is a relationship that we'll see play out later on in scripture. The relationship between David and Saul, the relationship between Esther and the Jews, and these relationships within the kingdom as the kingdom splits or the relationship within the undivided kingdom, the relationship between David and Jonathan.

All of these stories are stories that we need to keep our eye upon because they will take us all the way throughout scripture. And as you get even to the New Testament, these

themes continue to play out. Thank you very much for listening.

Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow with more on the story of Joseph. If you have any questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account. If you would like to support this and other videos like it, please do so using my Patreon or PayPal accounts.

Thank you so much to everyone who has supported me. It really makes such a difference. It is a great encouragement apart from anything else.

It is one of the things that makes me want to do these things, these videos and podcasts. So thank you very much. God bless and thank you for listening.