

Genesis 43 – Joseph and His Brothers-Part 2

Review

Last time, we saw that Jacob sent Joseph's elder brothers to Egypt from Canaan to buy grain because the seven-year famine predicted by Pharaoh's dreams had begun to be severe throughout the region. Joseph recognized his brothers, but they didn't recognize him. Joseph sold them the grain they needed but treated them roughly and demanded that they return to Canaan and not return to Egypt without his younger brother Benjamin. Joseph kept his brother Simeon as a hostage while the remaining brothers returned to Canaan.

Joseph's Brothers Return to Egypt Bringing Benjamin

As we pick up the story, Jacob's family has exhausted the grain Joseph's brothers bought on their initial journey, and they have no choice but to return to Egypt with Benjamin despite Jacob's objections.

¹Now the famine was severe in the land. ²And when they had eaten the grain that they had brought from Egypt, their father said to them, "Go again, buy us a little food." ³But Judah said to him, "The man solemnly warned us, saying, 'You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.' ⁴If you will send our brother with us, we will go down and buy you food. ⁵But if you will not send him, we will not go down, for the man said to us, 'You shall not see my face, unless your brother is with you.'" Genesis

43:1-5 (ESV)

Notice that neither Jacob nor his sons expressed any concern over their brother Simeon whom they left behind in Egypt as a hostage. It was only when they ran out of food that they decided to return to Joseph.

⁶Israel said, "Why did you treat me so badly as to tell the man that you had another brother?" ⁷They replied, "The man questioned us carefully about ourselves and our kindred, saying, 'Is your father still alive? Do you have another brother?' What we told him was in answer to these questions. Could we in any way know that he would say, 'Bring your brother down?'" ⁸And Judah said to Israel his father, "Send the boy with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, both we and you and also our little ones. ⁹I will be a pledge of his safety. From my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever. ¹⁰If we had not delayed, we would now have returned twice." Genesis 43:6-10 (ESV)

As we see in Genesis 43:6 in Jacob's view everything was always about him and his troubles, never about anyone else. Small wonder then that Judah responded with an outright lie, saying that Joseph had carefully questioned the brothers about their family. Recall from Genesis 42 that the brothers had volunteered the information in response to Joseph's accusations that they were spies. This was a pattern long established in Jacob's family. Having governed his sons and wives with a heavy hand his entire life, Jacob ensured that they would always be guarded in their interactions with him and would sometimes lie straight to his face to avoid his ire as Judah did here in this passage.

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NOTE - Throughout Genesis (and indeed all God's Word) beginning with God's renaming of Jacob at Peniel (Genesis 32), the narrative sometimes refers to Jacob by his original name – יַעֲקֹב *ya'ăqōb* - which means *heel-holder or supplanter*, and sometimes by his new name – יִשְׂרָאֵל *yisrā'el* – meaning *God prevails*. Without doubt, God had foreordained that Jacob's descendants were to inherit the land of Canaan and that Jacob's son Judah would be the forefather of our LORD Jesus. But Jacob/Israel didn't always enthusiastically allow God to prevail in his life. Often Jacob continued to behave like the self-promoting schemer he had been since childhood.

In this, Jacob/Israel reflects all redeemed humankind. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17:

17...if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. 2 Corinthians 5:17b (ESV)

But Paul might better have said, *the old is passing away; the new is coming*. Please don't misunderstand me. I would never presume to gainsay God's Holy Word. Yes indeed, God has set Christian believers apart from the world just as He did for Jacob/Israel. Moreover, He has indeed made us new creatures in Christ, sealing our redemption by the indwelling of His Spirit. But this justification was only the beginning of God's sanctifying work perfecting us into the image of His Son Jesus. Like Jacob/Israel, we don't always get it right. Furthermore, the plain fact of the matter is that our sanctification will only be complete when God calls us home to Heaven at last.

11Then their father Israel said to them, “If it must be so, then do this: take some of the choice fruits of the land in your bags, and carry a present down to the man, a little balm and a little honey, gum, myrrh, pistachio nuts, and almonds. 12Take double the money with you. Carry back with you the money that was returned in the mouth of your sacks. Perhaps it was an oversight. 13Take also your brother, and arise, go again to the man. 14May God Almighty [אֱלֹהֵי שָׁדַי – 'el šaday] grant you mercy before the man, and may he send back your other brother and Benjamin. And as for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved.” Genesis 43:11-14 (ESV)

I must confess that I am completely baffled by this passage. If the famine was so severe that Jacob's family had to travel to Egypt seeking food, why hadn't they already eaten the honey and nuts that Jacob suggested as a gift for Joseph? Be that as it may though, it seems that Jacob at least did the right thing in returning the money they had used to buy the first consignment of grain.

Once again, Jacob's self-centeredness raises its ugly head here. He seems to only consider how the possible loss of his sons might affect him personally. Never mind that they would be risking their lives to obtain more food for him and the rest of the family, leaving their own children starving and fatherless. We don't see Jacob advising them to be careful. We don't see him reminding them that he loved them. He doesn't even call Simeon who was left behind as a hostage in Egypt by name. At least he acknowledged that the success of their mission would depend upon the provision and protection of ***God Almighty*** [אֱלֹהֵי שָׁדַי – 'el šaday]. That much Israel got right.

15So the men took this present, and they took double the money with them, and Benjamin. They arose and went down to Egypt and stood before Joseph. 16When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the steward of

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his house, “Bring the men into the house, and slaughter an animal and make ready, for the men are to dine with me at noon.”¹⁷ The man did as Joseph told him and brought the men to Joseph’s house.¹⁸ And the men were afraid because they were brought to Joseph’s house, and they said, “It is because of the money, which was replaced in our sacks the first time, that we are brought in, so that he may assault us and fall upon us to make us servants and seize our donkeys.”¹⁹ So they went up to the steward of Joseph’s house and spoke with him at the door of the house,²⁰ and said, “Oh, my lord, we came down the first time to buy food.²¹ And when we came to the lodging place we opened our sacks, and there was each man’s money in the mouth of his sack, our money in full weight. So we have brought it again with us,²² and we have brought other money down with us to buy food. We do not know who put our money in our sacks.”²³ He replied, “Peace to you, do not be afraid. Your God [אֱלֹהִים 'elōhîm] and the God of your father has put treasure in your sacks for you. I received your money.” Then he brought Simeon out to them.²⁴ And when the man had brought the men into Joseph’s house and given them water, and they had washed their feet, and when he had given their donkeys fodder,²⁵ they prepared the present for Joseph’s coming at noon, for they heard that they should eat bread there. Genesis 43:15-25 (ESV)

Oh no! Not the donkeys! *Anything* but *that*! Seriously though, this passage is straightforward, needing little further exposition.

Genesis 43:23 however is noteworthy in that Joseph’s servant mentioned the brothers’ God and the God of their father **אֱלֹהִים 'elōhîm**. The servant was apparently aware that the men who had come from Canaan were Hebrews not Gentile Canaanites. Recall from Genesis 42:18, that Joseph had told his brothers “*...I fear God.*” It isn’t clear whether Joseph had also shared his faith with his servants. Notice that the servant didn’t say *my* God, but *yours*. Therefore, we can infer that even if Joseph shared his belief in the One True and Living God with his servants, Joseph’s steward didn’t himself worship and follow **אֱלֹהִים 'elōhîm**.

Recall that Joseph had ordered the money placed back in their sacks before sending them back to Canaan after their first visit to Egypt (Genesis 42:25). Joseph’s steward would certainly have been aware of these orders and very likely placed the brothers’ money back in their sacks himself. But the steward didn’t let on to Joseph’s brothers that Joseph had commanded it, instead claiming that he had received their money for the grain while God Himself had restored their money to them. We can only guess why the steward would do this, but presumably Joseph had told his servants to keep his magnanimity to themselves.

Before we press on, notice two components of ancient Middle Eastern etiquette that we find in this passage:

First, we have the washing of feet. Whenever a visitor entered a person’s house, it was considered proper for them to remove their footwear and to clean the dust and dirt from their feet. The host in turn would provide the water and towels for the foot washing. Possibly, one of the household servants might wash the guests’ feet. However, in this case, it seems that Joseph’s brothers washed their own feet. By providing the water, the host indicated how much he valued his guests. Recall that all the Middle Eastern countries are mostly desert. Therefore, water was always a very precious commodity to be used sparingly. By giving it freely to guests, a host indicated His respect for them and his

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gratitude for their visit. Conversely, by not providing water, a host indicated disdain for his guest, and his consideration that accommodating their visit was more duty than pleasure. Recall the story of Jesus' visit to the home of Simon the Pharisee and the woman who crashed that party and washed Jesus' feet with her tears.

³⁶One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. ³⁷And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, ³⁸and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. ³⁹Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." ⁴⁰And Jesus answering said to him, "**Simon, I have something to say to you.**" And he answered, "Say it, Teacher."

***⁴¹"A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴²When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" ⁴³Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "**You have judged rightly.**" ⁴⁴Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "**Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. ⁴⁶You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little."** ⁴⁸And he said to her, "**Your sins are forgiven.**" ⁴⁹Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" ⁵⁰And he said to the woman, "**Your faith has saved you; go in peace.**"** Luke 7:36-50 (ESV)*

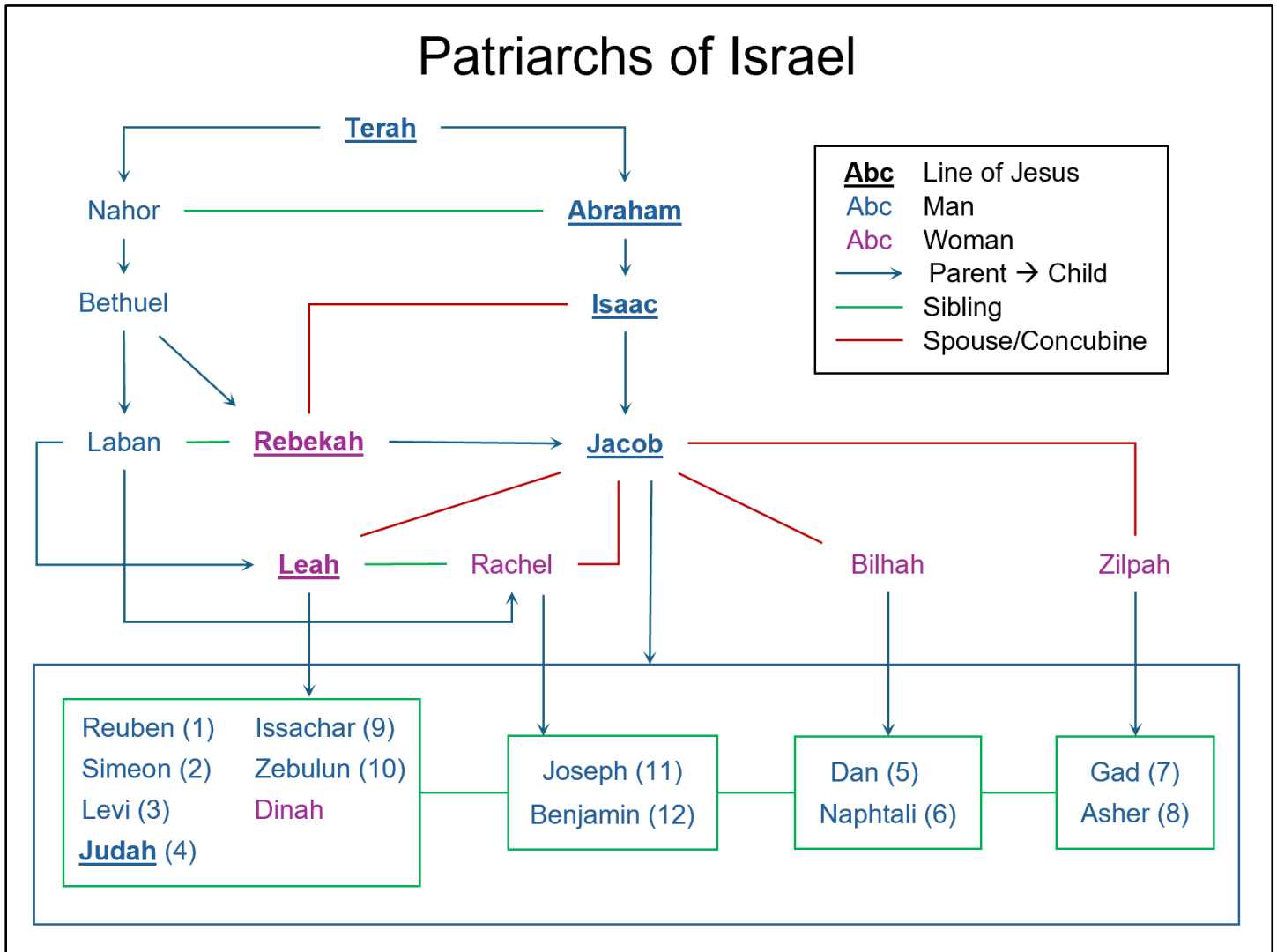
The sharing of a meal together is a very important component of hospitality – not only in Middle Eastern culture but throughout the world. The host provides the guests with the food itself (sometimes a significant financial sacrifice), and everyone involved shares the most important (and limited) commodity of them all – our time.

***²⁶When Joseph came home, they brought into the house to him the present that they had with them and bowed down to him to the ground. ²⁷And he inquired about their welfare and said, "Is your father well, the old man of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?" ²⁸They said, "Your servant our father is well; he is still alive." And they bowed their heads and prostrated themselves. ²⁹And he lifted up his eyes and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, and said, "Is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me? God be gracious to you, my son!" ³⁰Then Joseph hurried out, for his compassion grew warm for his brother, and he sought a place to weep. And he entered his chamber and wept there.** Genesis 43:26-30 (ESV)*

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Here again in Genesis 43:28 we find fulfilment of Joseph's dream about the grain sheaves from Genesis 37:7 – this time with all twelve brothers gathered in the same room for the first time in at least seven years. Why was Joseph so moved by Benjamin's presence that he felt compelled to leave the room and weep? Why had he insisted that his brothers return to Canaan bringing Benjamin back to Egypt with them in the first place?

Look at the Patriarchs of Israel chart.



Joseph and Benjamin were closer than either of them was to their other brothers for several reasons.

First, as Genesis 43:29 confirms, Joseph and Benjamin were true brothers – the sons of Jacob's favorite wife Rachel. Their other brothers were only half-brothers by Jacob's other wives. Furthermore, recall that Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin. Rachel's sons were probably raised by her maid servant Bilhah who likely considered raising them a burden rather than a blessing. She almost certainly gave preference to her own sons Dan and Naphtali insofar as Jacob allowed. Therefore, the familial bond between Joseph and Benjamin must have been much closer and stronger than their relationship with either their half-brothers or their stepmother.

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Joseph and Benjamin were the two youngest – Benjamin being Joseph’s only younger brother. Their half-brothers were several years older. Recall that Jacob served his uncle Laban seven years for Rachel, but Laban gave him Leah as wife in Rachel’s place. If Leah got pregnant immediately, we may safely assume that Leah bore (**not birthed!!!**) Jacob’s eldest son Reuben about 8 years after Jacob first arrived in Paddan-aram. Jacob continued to serve Laban for about 20 years in total before returning to Canaan where Benjamin was born. Therefore, Benjamin was at least 12 years younger than Reuben. We can’t determine precisely how old Joseph was when Benjamin was born, but most likely Joseph wasn’t more than a few years old. Even the youngest of Leah’s sons Zebulun was at least 2 years older than Joseph given that Leah bore their sister Dinah before Rachel got pregnant with Joseph (Genesis 30:20-24). Of course, Joseph himself must have been at least a year older than Benjamin, since they had the same mother.

In adulthood, age differences among siblings are only a minor factor in our relationships, but in our formative years, they can be quite significant. I am myself the eldest of six children. Like Reuben, I am twelve years older than my youngest brother who was only six when I moved out of my parents’ home. To him for years afterward I was only a vague memory of someone who used to be part of the family household but no longer was. Even now more than half a century later, I can well imagine how strongly I would object if he came to me saying he had seen me bowing down before him in a dream!

³¹Then he washed his face and came out. And controlling himself he said, “Serve the food.” ³²They served him by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because the Egyptians could not eat with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians. ³³And they sat before him, the firstborn according to his birthright and the youngest according to his youth. And the men looked at one another in amazement. ³⁴Portions were taken to them from Joseph’s table, but Benjamin’s portion was five times as much as any of theirs. And they drank and were merry [שָׂקָר šākar – got drunk] with him. Genesis 43:31-34 (ESV)

Joseph – being master of the house – would always have eaten separately from his Egyptian servants, and possibly apart from his guests depending on his guests’ relationship with him. We may assume that Joseph ate together with his Egyptian wife and with his half-Egyptian sons, but we have no way of knowing for certain. Since Joseph was playing the role of an Egyptian high official for his brothers (including Benjamin), eating apart from them would be quite expected.

What the brothers might not have expected was the quintuple portion of food given to Benjamin. Despite Joseph’s having hidden his weeping over Benjamin from them, the elder brothers must have discerned Joseph’s special attachment to him from his insistence during their previous visit that they must not return to Egypt without him. The extra portion given to Benjamin certainly confirmed Joseph’s affection for him, but they were likely very confused by it since they didn’t know who Joseph really was.

Finally, with all due apologies to my teetotaler friends, the Hebrew in Genesis 43:34 is quite clear. The word שָׂקָר šākar is very specific. It means to get drunk or become intoxicated, regardless of the euphemisms “*were merry*” applied by many English language translations like the ESV and “*drank freely*” as the NLT, NIV, and NASB render it. The CSB bluntly and honestly translates the last part of Genesis 43:34 – “*...They drank and became drunk with Joseph.*”

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Looking Ahead

Next time, we'll look at Joseph's continued toying with his brothers, still hiding his true identity from them until finally he could keep up the charade no longer.