

Genesis – Session Fifteen



Joseph Receives His Father and Brothers in Egypt by Salomon de Bray, 1655

I Myself will go down with you ...

Genesis: Chapters 45 – 48

Joseph Reveals His Identity to His Brothers

Jacob and His Sons Go to Egypt; Genealogy of the Sons of Israel;

Conclusion of the Tales of the Patriarchs in Canaan

Reduction of the Egyptian Peasantry to Slavery;

The Blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh;

Is My Father Still Alive; The Twelve Tribes of Israel; Your Servants are Shepherds;

The Joseph Story; Few and Bad

Is My Father Still Alive?

In *Genesis* 45:3, Joseph asks, “Is my father still alive?” But he *knows* that his father is still alive. He already asked his brothers this (43:27). Even the major traditional commentators do not address this. In critical scholarship it is understood that these two seemingly conflicting passages come from two different sources. But even if this is so, how shall we understand Joseph’s question in the context of the narrative as it stands? It seems to me that the key is that when he asks them the first time, it is in the role that he is playing as an Egyptian official, with his real identity hidden from them. But now he puts together his revelation of who he really is with his question about Jacob: “I’m Joseph. Is my father still alive?” For all he knows, his brothers were lying to him as the Egyptian official, but now he asks them: tell me, your brother, Joseph, is he really alive?”

– Richard Elliott Friedman (*Commentary on the Torah*)

The Twelve Tribes of Israel



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This map shows the approximate locations of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. There appear to be no universally accepted exact boundaries. The children of Israel continued to be primarily nomadic herdsmen. Some maps, for example, show East Manasseh (east of the Jordan River) to be much farther north, with Gad extending as far north as the Sea of Galilee, and East Manasseh north of Gad, not directly attached to West Manasseh. There are two territories of Dan, one north of Naphtali, and another on the Mediterranean coast in an area that includes Joppa. These are the locations of the tribes after the Exodus from Egypt. Some tribes eventually melted away and were absorbed into other tribes (Reuben and Simeon). There is no tribe for Levi (the Levites became the priests) and no tribe for Joseph (Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh each had a tribal area). Shechem (in Manasseh) became the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel after the kingdom was split.

Your Servants Are Shepherds

Joseph had just told them not to answer Pharaoh that they are shepherds (46:33 – 34), yet they go ahead and say it! (47:3). Some might surmise that this seeming contradiction is the result of the combination of two sources into one story. But that is not correct. This has nothing to do with the sources that are identified in critical biblical scholarship. This is one continuous passage (all from the source known in scholarship as J). The difficulty in the brothers' words must therefore be understood as being a part of the story itself: The brothers simply do not follow Joseph's instructions. He has told them to say that they are cowherds, because Egyptians disdain shepherds; but they are not willing to misrepresent themselves in this way. Are they right? On one hand, Pharaoh does permit them to settle and offers them the best of Egypt's land. But, on the other hand, Pharaoh stops speaking directly to them. He switches to speaking about them in the third person to Joseph. And he offers to have some of them serve as officers over his *cattle* even though they have just said they are shepherds, not cattlemen.

– Richard Elliott Friedman (*Commentary on the Torah*)

The Joseph Story

In many ways the Joseph story is different from many of the other stories in Genesis. Although there are a small number of inconsistencies within the story, such as whether Joseph was sold to the Midianites (37:28a, 36) or Ishmaelites (37:25 – 27, 28b), these are rather inconsequential when compared to contradictions in earlier sections of Genesis. Even chapter 38, the story of Judah and Tamar, which interrupts the flow of the Joseph story, is well integrated into the larger story through use of theme and vocabulary. There is a sense of drama and deep interest in what we would call human psychology throughout the story: Genesis 37 – 50 incorporates a variety of traditions; it was not the work of a single author. For these reasons, several scholars understand the story as a separate novella.

Several elements of the Joseph story are clearly symbolic. For example, a significant theme of this story is the conflict among the brothers (especially Joseph and Judah), which mirrors the conflicts of the divided monarchy. The story explains why Judah became the most important tribe among the children of Leah. In fact, much of the Joseph story can be understood as the narrative elaboration of an idea found in I Chronicles:

(5:1). The sons of Reuben the first-born of Israel. He was the first-born; but when he defiled his father's bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph son of Israel, so he is not reckoned as first-born in the genealogy. (2) though Judah became more powerful than his brothers and a leader came from him, yet the birthright belonged to Joseph.

In other words, the story describes the relationships among Reuben, Judah, and Joseph, which actually represent the later relationships among subgroups of Israel.

In genealogical lists, being firstborn often represents being the most powerful. In this story, Reuben was disqualified because he “lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine” (35:22). Simeon and Levi are disqualified because they massacred a Canaanite city (chapter 34). Thus, before

the Joseph story starts, Judah, the fourth-born son, is left as the dominant brother. This theme of who deserves the right of firstborn is played out almost from the opening of the Joseph story. Reuben is unsuccessful at saving Joseph's life (37:21 – 22, 29 – 30), while Judah's plan succeeds (37:26 – 27). The prominent role of Judah is reflected in Genesis 38. Later, after the brothers have returned from Egypt, Reuben offers to return to Egypt with Benjamin, but Jacob refuses. A few verses later, Judah makes a similar offer and this time Jacob accedes. In both of these places, Judah plays the role of leader, of firstborn, instead of Reuben. The Joseph story can be viewed as symbolically as a struggle between the house of Judah, representing the Davidic monarchy, and the house of Joseph representing the northern kingdom. The story accurately reflects that the northern kingdom ("Joseph") was much larger in area, and more powerful militarily, than Judah to the south.

However, reading the story *only* as political allegory is erroneous. In antiquity, as in modern times, literary works were often written for more than one purpose. The author or compiler of the Joseph story had an unusually strong dramatic sense, and was quite interested in human psychology. This may already be seen from the introduction to the story, which shows a keen interest in the various relationships between a father and sets of children from various wives. It notes details that are typically omitted in biblical stories, such as the age of the protagonist (17), or Joseph spending his time with the concubine's children (37:2). Thus, from its very beginning, the story sets up a problem – how will a young child, the son of the dead favored wife, fare, especially since he seems to be associating with the less powerful children?

Like many good stories, the introduction to the Joseph story leaves many questions unanswered. How are we to understand Joseph? Is he a spoiled brat who takes advantage of his situation as favored son, or is he naïve? What about Jacob? Why, for example, does he send Joseph out after his brothers – is he trying to teach Joseph a lesson, or is he oblivious to the dynamic among the brothers? Many more such questions are at the surface here, suggesting that it would be a simplification to read this story *only* as a political allegory.

– Marc Zvi Brettler (adapted from *How to Read the Jewish Bible*,
Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, 2005, 2007)

Few and Bad

Jacob is critical of all his life (Genesis 47:9), in itself, and in comparison with Abraham's and Isaac's lives. This is consistent with the telling of the story until now, which has not excused or sanitized Jacob the way some Sunday schools, early commentaries, and modern interpreters do. The biblical writers seem to have been quite content to leave their heroes imperfect. Why? Why even conceive of such a story? Perhaps the author thus pointed to deception in the world and said, "It comes back." Or perhaps the author conceived it in literary protest against the ancient Near Eastern practice of glorifying national heroes. As has frequently been observed, to read the ancient reports one would think that no Near Eastern king ever lost a battle. A clear majority of the biblical authors, however, show their heroes with weaknesses and imperfections, making errors and committing offenses. For whatever purpose the author of the Jacob cycle conceived this story, the fact is that this author exhibited an historical, realistic impulse, a sense of the psychological complexity of

families: sibling rivalry, fathers and sons in conflict, mothers finding channels of influence in male family structures, women torn between fathers and husbands. Further, it may be said that by not glorifying its human heroes the text glorifies its other central figure, the deity. The message here may well be that God can work through anyone: through an all-obedient man, a passive dim-eyed patriarch, or a deceiver.

– Richard Elliott Friedman (*Commentary on the Torah*)

Next Session: Chapters 49 and 50. Jacob offers blessings to his sons and his vision for the future of the Children of Israel; The death and funeral of Jacob. The conclusion of the Book of Genesis