



FEED MY SHEEP

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Joseph Tests His Brothers

The Story of Joseph, Part 15

We will not review from the beginning in this installment, but only enough to give us the context of where we are in the story. Joseph is now the de facto ruler of Egypt. His word is law. He has arranged for grain to be stockpiled during the seven years of plenty. Now the famine has struck. Not only has Egypt been struck, but the entire region, including Canaanland, has been severely impacted by the dearth. In the second year of the famine, Jacob sends his ten sons down to Egypt to purchase grain. Word had spread of the great and wise ruler down there, whose name was Zaphnath-paaneah, and how he had many years earlier embarked upon a “survivalist” food storage program.

Jacob, since the supposed death of Joseph some 22 years previously, had doted on Benjamin, the second son of his beloved wife, Rachel, as his now favorite son. So he kept him home while the ten older brothers were assigned the task of going to Egypt to procure food. By combining the narrative of Genesis with that given in the book of Jasher, we were able to see in recent issues a much more detailed picture of the course of events. For example, recall that Jasher recounts how on their way to Egypt, the ten brethren repented of what they had done to Joseph, and they vowed among themselves several things.

Number one: that before seeking to purchase food, they would first seek their brother Joseph. Number two: that if they found him, they would pay his master a ransom for him. And number three: that if the master refused to accept a ransom for Joseph, that they would be willing to die in order to retrieve Joseph. Joseph, meanwhile, knowing that that his brothers would be coming to buy grain, set in motion his detailed plan so that he would know exactly when and where his brothers came into the land. Sure enough, the gatekeepers reported to Joseph that each of the ten brothers had come in at a separate gate into Egypt, and so Joseph had all the storehouses closed down except one, and he had that

one staked out.

When the brothers didn’t show up for a couple days, Joseph was perplexed, and so he sent detachments of men to scour the land until they found the brothers. Where were they found? (Gasp!) The brothers were looking for Joseph in the brothels of Egypt. This speaks volumes about how the brothers perceived the character of Joseph. And when Jesus came, what did the self-righteous religious leaders say about the Greater Joseph? Did they not say that He was a winebibber and a person who made friends with scum like harlots and tax collectors? Indeed, they did. The brothers are then brought into the presence of Joseph and they are awestruck by his presence and majesty.

One might wonder—didn’t they have any inkling that this was their own brother whom they had sold into bondage? Well, remember these things: first, like all Egyptians, Joseph was clean-shaven, and even though he was only 17 when he was sold into bondage, chances are he had a pretty good crop of facial fur by that age, so that his brothers’ last remembrance of Joseph is of him with a beard. Secondly, from ages 17 and 18 and on into their late 20s, teenage boys turn into men. They fill out in muscle tone and their facial features can change somewhat during that time. Men, pull out your high school graduation yearbook and ask a stranger to pick out of all the seniors which one is you. You see the point. Remember now, Joseph is almost 40 years old, so that considerable change of facial features is possible. Thirdly, being hauled into the presence of the king of Egypt’s second man (the vizier, the Prime Minister in modern parlance) would have been quite intimidating for these men from the backwoods of Canaan, as it were. This ruler, this man named Zaphnath-paaneah, is seated on a throne high above them.

He has a crown on his head, he is clothed in royal apparel and he has a bodyguard of well-equipped sol-

diers all around him. As it said in Jasher, “they knew him not, for Joseph was very great in their eyes.” This ruler was such an impressive and dignified figure that there was no way that these boys from Bedouin country were going to recognize Zaphnath-paaneah as their brother Joseph. But they did bow down to him numerous times, thus already fulfilling the prophetic dreams that Joseph had bragged about to them when he was only 17. The dreams where the stars and the brothers’ sheaves all bowed down to Joseph. Then the thought of that submission to their little brother drove the other brothers to such an extreme, that they said in ...

Genesis 37:20 Come now therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into some pit, and we will say, Some evil beast hath devoured him: and we shall see what will become of his dreams.

Indeed, now see what has become of his dream! And yet, at this point they are totally unaware that they are now fulfilling the prophetic dream. In a similar vein, we closed in our last issue with the astonishing realization that since Joseph was already ruling Egypt *before* his brethren recognized his identity, that typologically speaking, this seems to indicate that the vast majority of Christian Israel will not recognize who Joseph is in these latter days *until* the Joseph Company of overcomers are seated in positions of authority and rulership in the kingdom!

Therefore, I remind us all: do not get frustrated when people cannot see what you and I perceive so clearly: that we are descendants of those Israelites, and that we are living in Joseph’s land. It is simply not yet the appointed time for their eyes to be opened. Nonetheless, we should continue to witness to that truth, because there *are* the tiny remnant of people who are meant to see at *this* time. Now let us pick up the story again in Genesis 42. Incidentally, there may be some who are skeptical when we had read in Jasher how Joseph learned 70 languages in one night, remember that? In fact, there are other unusual things that are detailed in Jasher which might stretch our credulity. But let us remember that in the Bible itself there are a number of miracles which are no less spectacular than what is recorded in the book of Jasher. I mean, come on, we are presented in the Bible with a false prophet by the name of Balaam, whose own donkey spoke to him!

Insofar as Joseph learning 70 languages overnight, I would point out the similarity of that with the day of Pentecost when the apostles arose and preached and each man heard them in his own language. Do you believe that? So do I. Also, I alluded to the sci-fi film, *The Matrix*, regarding the superfast downloading of information into our minds. My friends, such things are even now technologically at the door. Now to Genesis 42 to continue the story.

Genesis 42:5 And the sons of Israel came to buy *corn* among those that came: for the famine was in the land of Canaan.

6 And Joseph *was* the governor over the land, and he *it was* that sold to all the people of the land: and Joseph’s brethren came, and bowed down themselves before him *with* their faces to the earth.

7 And Joseph saw his brethren, and he knew them, but made himself strange unto them, and spake roughly unto them; and he said unto them, Whence come ye? And they said, From the land of Canaan to buy food.

8 And Joseph knew his brethren, but they knew not him.

9 And Joseph remembered the dreams which he dreamed of them, and said unto them, Ye *are* spies; to see the nakedness of the land ye are come.

Joseph’s actions would not be considered unusual in the circumstances of the times. During those centuries, Egypt was always on guard against invasion from the early empires of Assyria and Babylon. And that invasion would come through Canaanland. Consequently, many if not *all* foreigners would have been subjected to *some* manner of interrogation on the possibility that they might be spies for a foreign power. After all, with the whole region having been weakened by the famine, it would be an ideal time for an enemy to strike, either in an attempt to seize the stores of Egypt or merely for conquest’s sake.

We will see later in the Jasher account that there was another reason which would have cast a great deal of suspicion on the brothers to a ruler of Egypt. We can imagine how the ten brothers must have trembled in the presence of this Egyptian ruler, Zaphnath-paaneah! Keep in mind also, that Joseph, in order not to give away his identity, would have spoken in the Egyptian language and he would have provided the services of a translator for the Hebrews from Canaan. Therefore, even though Joseph obviously understands every word his brothers speak in Hebrew, he feigns ignorance and waits patiently as the translator translates for him.

10 And they said unto him, Nay, my lord, but to buy food are thy servants come.

11 We *are* all one man’s sons; we *are* true men, thy servants are no spies.

Can you imagine the terror in their minds as they are here in front of the ruler of Egypt (the world’s superpower of that era) and he appears to truly believe that they are spies. Throughout the centuries and in every nation, there has usually been only one fate for a spy who is caught. They are tortured to extract any

pertinent information and then they are killed.

Oh, how the tables were turned! Twenty-two years ago, young Joey was at the mercy of his brothers as they sought first to kill him in their envy and rage, but settled for his sale into slavery. Now Joseph has them completely at his mercy. But only he knows it. Will he use this opportunity to exact revenge upon them? His manner toward them is very harsh. He hears their denial that they are spies; waits for the translation; scowls at them, and perhaps in a pseudo outburst of rage, shrieks in an accusatory voice:

12 And he said unto them, Nay, but to see the nakedness of the land ye are come.

The brothers are beside themselves. What can they do except to tell the truth? So they start with their family information, and this time they mention all the sons, not just the ten of them. As we will see later, this information was not all actually *volunteered* by them.

13 And they said, Thy servants *are* twelve brethren, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan; and, behold, the youngest *is* this day with our father, and one is not.

You see, being charged with espionage, they figure that surely this Zaphnath-paaneah, who is obviously a highly intelligent individual, that surely he can understand what a folly it would be for a father to send almost all his sons as spies together on one mission. Surely, that fact would prove to a ruler with any wisdom at all that they *couldn't* be spies.

That last phrase in verse 13, "one is not," was their very cautious way of referring to Joseph's absence. Notice, they do not say he is dead; they truly do not know if he is dead or alive; but their very mission was to find and rescue him and take both him and provisions of food back home to their father Israel. Notice also, this is the first time they have revealed that they even have a younger brother who has remained at home with their father, referring to Benjamin, of course, who is no longer little Benjy but has to be about 35 years old by now. At this point, they are trying to be completely honest about their family in the hope this governor will see they couldn't possibly be spies.

14 And Joseph said unto them, That *is it* that I spake unto you, saying, Ye *are* spies:

That is a bit puzzling. Instead of being persuaded they are innocent, it seems to imply that Joseph is essentially saying: "See, that proves it. It's just as I said earlier, "you men are spies." We have to wonder then, what was it that appeared to prove that they were

spies? Again, the fuller version in Jasher explains it very satisfactorily. The governor of Egypt continues by decreeing:

Genesis 42:15 Hereby ye shall be proved: By the life of Pharaoh ye shall not go forth hence, except your youngest brother come hither.

16 Send one of you, and let him fetch your brother, and ye shall be kept in prison, that your words may be proved, whether *there be any truth in you*: or else by the life of Pharaoh surely ye *are* spies.

Did they all refuse to send just one of them back and therefore end up in jail?

17 And he put them all together into ward three days.

Joseph has therefore treated them harshly now for three days. Was he trying to get revenge now, to pay them back for what they had done to him? We all know the answer to that: of course not. He knew they were not spies. He knew they were not lying. He knew they told the truth about his own family, about Jacob, about Benjamin, about the one brother who "is not." Instead of seeking revenge, Joseph was *testing* his brothers...to see as it says in verse 16: whether *there be any truth in you*. He was testing them to see if there had been any real change of character in them. He was testing their hearts to discern their attitude towards Benjamin, the son of Rachel, who had replaced Joseph as his father's favorite. He also wanted to discern if there were any repentance and remorse for what they had done to him. So, since they refused to send just one of them back alone, he let them cool their heels in jail for three days. Hebron was approximately 200 miles from Egypt and with all their beasts of burden, it may have been a trip of a week to ten days at the least.

18 And Joseph said unto them the third day, This do, and live; *for* I fear God:

The word for God there is "elohim." It can also be translated as little "g" gods. So that Joseph's statement would not necessarily have raised any suspicions. Some think it is a reference to the one true God, which it is, in hundreds of other cases, so either meaning is possible. If Joseph is referring the true God of the Hebrews, that would mean that the knowledge and worship of the one true God was being practiced in Egypt at that time, which some believe it was under a Pharaoh named Akhenaton (spelling varies). In any event, it was Joseph's way of conveying to these Hebrews that they could count on his word to keep his end of

the deal which he was now dictating to them. They are still in jail as Joseph tells them the deal:

19 If ye *be* true *men*, let one of your brethren be bound in the house of your prison: go ye, carry corn for the famine of your houses:

20 But bring your youngest brother unto me; so shall your words be verified, and ye shall not die. And they did so.

Alright, so Joseph has now reversed his earlier demand. Instead of keeping nine in jail and sending one home; he relents and allows nine to return home and one must remain in prison. All on the condition that they return with Benjamin. If they don't bring Benjamin, they will be put to death. They agreed to this and then they begin discussing how they had come into such a plight. Since the brothers have no inkling that Zaphnath-paaneah understands Hebrew, they openly discuss their deeds while he is still within earshot.

21 And they said one to another, We *are* verily guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the anguish of his soul, when he besought us, and we would not hear; therefore is this distress come upon us.

22 And Reuben answered them, saying, Spake I not unto you, saying, Do not sin against the child; and ye would not hear? therefore, behold, also his blood is required.

23 And they knew not that Joseph understood *them*; for he spake unto them by an interpreter.

24 And he turned himself about from them, and wept; and returned to them again, and communed with them, and took from them Simeon, and bound him before their eyes.

Why Simeon? I would suggest that he was holding the eldest one accountable for the group. Reuben was the eldest brother, but Joseph had just learned that Reuben had stood up for him and tried to dissuade the others from murdering him. For that reason alone, perhaps, Joseph turned to Simeon, the second oldest, as the hostage. But there is an additional reason Joseph may have chosen Simeon and that is that father Jacob-Israel may have had less affection for Reuben since he had slept with Bilhah, one of Jacob's concubines. In any event, verse 24 simply states that Joseph took Simeon and bound him before their eyes. But, according to Jasher, that was not so simply a task as the brief statement in Genesis would lead us to believe. So in our next issue, we will backtrack and fill in more exciting details from the book of Jasher.

The Book of Jasher

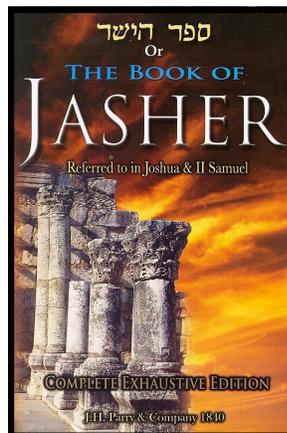
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