

Judah Takes the Place of Benjamin

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What can be said about the family of Jacob? In a word, dysfunctional. Jacob had twelve children with four different wives. Of course, Jacob had a favorite wife: Rachel. They had a son: Joseph. Among his sons, Joseph was his favorite. Favoritism within a family will produce all kinds of animosities. This was certainly true with Jacob's family.

If Jacob's favoritism was in question, he confirmed it by giving a special coat to Joseph. Jacob's preferential treatment of Joseph caused Joseph to have an inflated self-image. The dreams Joseph started having only fueled the hatred of Joseph's brothers.

Eventually, the hatred of Joseph's brothers reached a boiling point. They decided to kill the dreamer (Gen. 37:18-20). Reuben, however, expressed concern about killing their brother. Instead of killing Joseph, they decided to throw him into a pit in the wilderness. After doing this, they ate a meal. While they were eating, they noticed a traveling caravan of Egyptians. Being an enterprising young man, Judah suggested selling Joseph to the Egyptians. Rather than kill him, they could make money on Joseph and get him out of their lives forever. They sold Joseph to the Egyptians.

As the years passed, Jacob lived as a grieving father. His sons lived with the truth. Joseph lived a lonely, hard life as a captive in a strange country. By the providence of God, Joseph's life changed dramatically. Joseph ascended to the heights of power in Egypt.

In a dream, God showed Joseph the future. Egypt would have seven years of prosperity followed by seven years of famine. Pharaoh put Joseph in charge of managing the nation in the seven years of prosperity to prepare them for the seven years of famine. When the famine came, Egypt was the only nation that had enough grain to feed itself and sell to others. By God's providence and Joseph's leadership, Egypt would prosper in a time of famine.

A Strange Reunion

The Mesopotamian famine hit the family of Jacob hard. Jacob instructed his sons to go to Egypt to buy grain. All but one of Jacob's surviving sons went to Egypt: Benjamin. Benjamin was Jacob's youngest son, the only surviving son to his favorite wife, Rachel, and the only surviving brother to his favorite son, Joseph. Jacob could not risk losing Benjamin (Gen. 42:4). So, the brothers traveled to Egypt without Benjamin.

Upon their arrival in Egypt, Joseph recognized his brothers; however, they did not recognize him. Joseph remembered a dream he once had in which they bowed before him. Being in a position of power, Joseph decided to trouble them. Joseph accused them of being spies.

In a state of panic, the brothers explained their situation to Joseph. They told him of their family situation. They had a father who was old, a younger brother who stayed with him, and one brother who was "no more" (Gen. 42:13). Rather than let them go, Joseph decided to detain

Simeon and allow the others to return home. They were to bring back their youngest brother, Benjamin. This would confirm their story. They agreed to Joseph's terms; although, they thought this situation was somehow a punishment for what they did to the brother who was no more.

While traveling home, the brothers found the money they were to have used to buy grain buried in their grain sacks. They thought they had been framed to look like they had stolen grain. When they got home they explained the situation to their father. Jacob was angry. As far as he was concerned, he had lost two sons: Joseph and now Simeon. The thought of risking the loss of Benjamin was unbearable.

Jacob had no intention of sending his sons back to Egypt; however, the famine persisted. Jacob and his family need to return to Egypt to buy more grain; however, they could not return without Benjamin. Finally, Jacob relented and the brothers began their journey to Egypt with Benjamin.

Joseph and his brothers met again; however, the brothers still did not recognize the identity of Joseph. After being well received, Joseph had his servants fill their sacks with grain, return their money, and had his silver cup put into the grain sack of Benjamin. The following morning, the brothers left for home. After leaving, Joseph had his servants catch up to his brothers. Upon searching their caravan, they found Joseph's silver cup in Benjamin's grain sack. They detained Benjamin.

Benjamin being taken was what Jacob had most feared. As Benjamin was being taken, Judah began to plead with Joseph. He explained how devastating Benjamin being kept in Egypt would be for their father. Judah had promised his father to be responsible for Benjamin. Judah purposed an idea: Judah offered to take the place of Benjamin:

Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the boy as a servant to my lord, and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the evil that would find my father" (Gen. 44:33-34).

Judah's offer was more than Joseph could bear. Finally, Joseph revealed his identity and was tearfully reconciled with his brothers. In time, Jacob relocated to Egypt and settled in the region of Goshen.

What's the Point?

As familiar as this story is to most readers, what is the point of retelling it? This story fits more broadly into the Messianic framework of Genesis. Genesis is telling us how God is going to redeem humanity through the seed of woman (Gen. 3:15). Judah taking the place of Benjamin foreshadows the work of the Messiah. Before dying, Jacob blessed Judah by declaring the scepter would never depart his family (Gen. 49:8-12). The Messiah would spring from the all but forgotten royal dynasty of the tribe of Judah (Rom. 1:1-4; Heb. 7:14; Rev. 4:4).

We can see how Judah is connected to the Messiah, but what about Benjamin? Can you recall a prominent New Testament figure from the tribe of Benjamin? Of course, the apostle Paul was from the tribe of Benjamin (Phil. 3:5).

Paul would sometimes write about how the Messiah died for us (Rom. 5:8-11; Gal. 1:3-4). As a Jewish scholar from the tribe of Benjamin, I wonder what Paul thought of Judah offering to take the place of Benjamin? Did he read this ancient text as a clue about what the Messiah would do for the world?

Just as Judah offered to take the place of Benjamin, the Messiah took the place of Paul. The Messiah took the place of us. The Messiah died on the cross as our representative substitute. Isaiah prophesied the Messiah would bear our sins and take our punishment (Isa. 53:5).

Judah offering to take the place of Benjamin is a turning point in the narrative of redemption. This was a clue about how the Messiah would take our sins and punishment. As self-giving as Judah was in this moment, what he did pales in comparison to what the Messiah did for us.