TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

Joseph's Final Test

Genesis 44.1–34

Section Structure

1. Genesis 44 completes the unit comprising chapters 42—44. The unit has two parts, each containing two encounters, an introduction, and two interludes (Brueggemann 1982, 336).
   a. Section introduction — 42.1–5: the famine as a life and death issue for Israel.
   b. Part 1 — 42.6–25: First meeting between Joseph and his brothers.
      Interlude in 42.26–28: brothers' departure and Joseph's trick.
      1) 42.29–38: First meeting of Jacob and sons.
      2) 43.1–15: Second meeting of Jacob and sons. (Not merely a continuation; there is discontinuity caused by the severity of the famine.)
   c. Part 2 — 43.16—44.34: Second meeting between Joseph and his brothers.
      Interlude in 44.1–5: brothers' departure and Joseph's trick.

Chapter Structure

2. Chapter 44 relates: (a) Joseph's final test of his brothers; and (b) Judah's response/plea for mercy.
   a. The test is designed to determine once and for all the genuine attitude of the ten brothers toward Benjamin, their youngest brother and the full brother of Joseph. In a sense, the test turns back the wheel of time to the crime against Joseph with the circumstances reproduced and the ten potentially aligned against Benjamin. Would they abandon him to Egyptian slavery as they had Joseph? (Mathews 2005, loc 21,131)
   b. In the test, Joseph amplifies the pressure to pit the ten brothers against the one remaining obstacle to Jacob's favor. "Cynically speaking, they could return to their father with a clear conscience, for indeed they had no control over Benjamin's fate in the hands of so despotic a ruler as the Egyptian master!" They could reason that God had spoken, for Jacob had conceded whatever outcome ensued was of divine providence (cf. 43.14: "if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved") (Mathews 2005, 21,137).

3. The chapter divides naturally into two parts with a bridge between them.
   a. Joseph deceives his brothers (vv. 1–13).
      1) Judah confesses / Joseph punishes (vv. 14–17).
   b. Judah pleads for mercy (vv. 18–34).

The Players in the Drama

4. The major players are Joseph and Judah, who takes center stage as the spokesman for the brothers.

5. But prominent in the background are Jacob and Benjamin.
   a. They are not so much "minor" players as drama influencers.
   b. Jacob ("father," אָב, *ʾāḇ*) is referenced fourteen times in the chapter, all but one in Judah's speech (vv. 17, 19, 20, 22 [2x], 24, 25, 27, 30, 31, 32 [2x], 34 [2x].
   c. Benjamin is mentioned once by name (v. 12), but referred to repeatedly with pronouns and descriptors.
      1) The youngest (vv. 2, 12).
      2) Youngest brother (vv. 23, 26 [2x]).
      3) The one who was found to have the cup (vv. 16, 17).
      4) The boy (vv. 22, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34).[1]
      5) Child (v. 20; יֶלֶד, *yeled*).
      6) The only one of his mother left (v. 20).
      7) One of two sons born to Rachel (v. 27).
      8) This one (v. 29)
      9) "His life" (v. 30).

6. To the above, we should add this comment: "The life of this family is a game with many players. None of the players knows all the rules because the Key Player is always less than visible" (Brueggemann 1982, 337).

Joseph Deceives His Brothers (vv. 1–13)

7. *The steward plants the silver cup (vv. 1–2)*. Joseph again commands his steward to put each brother's money back in his food sack; unlike the first time, he tells him to put his "silver cup in the mouth of the sack of the youngest" (v. 2).

8. *The steward overtakes the brothers (vv. 3–5).*
   a. The charge that they had "repaid evil for good" (v. 4) is an accusation that they had maliciously exploited Joseph's kindness. The OT frequently condemns this sin (1 Sam 25.21; Pss 35.12; 38.20; 109.5; Prov 17.13) and extols the virtue of returning good for evil (Exod 23.4–5; 1 Sam 24.17; Job 16.4–5; Prov 25.21–22) (Mathews 2005, 21,271; Willis 1989, 420).

9. The "cup" in this text is not a common drinking cup (e.g., 40.11; 2 Sam 12.3), but a bowl-sized "chalice or goblet" (cf. Exod 25.31–34; 37.17–20; Jer 35.5) (Mathews 2005, 21,260).

10. More important here is the reference to the cup's use for "divination" (v. 5).
   a. Divination is the practice of foreseeing the future or discovering hidden knowledge; it was widely practiced in the Near East.
   b. Little is known of divination techniques in Egypt, but Mesopotamian evidence indicates that what is referred to here is hydromancy and "took place by observing liquids poured into a cup (either the shapes of oil on water or the ripples of water)" (Walton 2009, 133; Mathews 2005, 21,276).
   c. It is difficult to determine from vv. 5 and 15 whether Joseph really practiced divination or was trying to make his brothers believe he could to "sell" the ruse involved in his test (Willis 1979, 420–421).
      1) Given its condemnation in the law, some question whether Joseph would practice it (cf. Lev 19.26; Deut 18.10) (Mathews 2005, 21,279). Of course, the law is later than Joseph.
      2) Walton (2009, 133) notes that "it is of interest that Joseph acquires information by means of the cup—not by pouring liquid into it, but by using it to test his brothers, thus using observation at a different level."

11. *The brothers assert their innocence, but the cup is found in Benjamin's bag (vv. 6–13).*

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[1] Notice that Benjamin is referred to as a "boy" (נָעַר, *nāʿar*) in v. 30, and again in vv. 32–34. The term does not mean that he was a young boy at this time; he would have been well into his thirties. Rather, Judah uses it in a relative sense as a term of endearment, indicative of Benjamin's esteem in Jacob's eyes and the fact that Judah was considerably older (Willis 1979, 422).

a. Confronted with the charge of theft, the brothers, with logic on their side (they brought back the money from the first time) assert their innocence and quickly unpack their bags to prove it.
b. They are so sure of themselves that they volunteer to endure the worst of punishments: death to the culprit and slavery for the rest (v. 9).
c. The steward agrees, with considerable mitigation: the culprit will be a slave, the others will go free.
    1) "Innocent" (v. 10; "free from blame" NIV) is from the Hebrew word נָקִי (*naqi*) which means "acquitted," that is, free of guilt and the responsibility for it (Harris 2019, note on v. 10).
d. When the search revealed the cup in Benjamin's sack, they "tore their clothes" before loading their donkeys and returning to the city.
    1) Tearing the clothes was a sign of deep emotional distress and was done for one of three reasons:
        a) To show grief (Gen 37.34; Judg 11.35; 2 Sam 1.11; 3.31; 13.19, 31 [twice]; 15.32; 2 Kings 2.12; 6.30; 18.37; 19.1; Esth 4.1; Isa 36.22; 37.1; Jer 41.5).
        b) To demonstrate a penitent spirit (1 Kings 21.27; 2 Kings 22.11, 19; 2 Chron 34.19, 27; Jer 36.24; Joel 2.13).
        c) To express displeasure or regret that something had happened (Gen 37.29; Num 14.6; Josh 7.6; 2 Kings 5.7, 8 [twice]; 11.14; 2 Chron 23.13; Ezra 9.3, 5).
    2) The context here suggests that they tore their clothes to show they genuinely regretted what happened and were grief-stricken over what they anticipated for Benjamin (Willis 1979, 421).

Face to Face with Joseph (vv. 14–17)

12. Returning to Joseph's house, they "fell before him to the ground" and faced Joseph's judgment.
    a. Joseph's question in verse 15 is rhetorical, asked to impress on them the seriousness of the theft of his cup (cf. a similar question in 3.13; 4.10; 12.18; 20.9; 26.10; 29.25; 31.26).
    b. Judah's response (v. 16) is noteworthy and may carry a meaning with multiple nuances.
        1) He knows they didn't steal the money or the cup, so he concludes that God was punishing them for some unspecified offense.
        2) Alternately, they were finally answering for their unatoned-for crime against Joseph twenty-two years before (cf. v. 16a).
        3) Significantly, he declares that he and the other brothers will join in whatever punishment Joseph decides; they will not abandon Benjamin to Egypt as they had forsaken Joseph.
        4) Mathews summarizes this key moment: "Now the brothers face the 'moment of truth' when they can either abandon their brother or save him.… Yet the offer of leniency for the brothers meant exactly what they would not do—face their father once again without their brother (cp. Reuben's sentiment, 37: 30)" (Mathews 2005, 21,377).
    c. Joseph, however, decrees that only the offending brother (Benjamin) will be punished (v. 17).

Judah Pleads for Mercy (vv. 18–34)

13. In the longest speech in Genesis, Judah pleads for mercy, recapitulating the events that led to this point.

14. Significantly, his plea centers on Jacob (vv. 18–32).
    a. He begins with the deference of one who stands condemned (v. 18).
    b. He refers to past events in Genesis.
        1) Verse 27: the births of Joseph and Benjamin to Rachel, Jacob's favorite (30.22–24; 35.16–20).
        2) Verse 28: the loss (in Jacob's eyes) of Joseph (37.33).
        3) Verses 29, 31: the expected demise of a grief stricken Jacob if Benjamin is also lost to him (37.35; 42.38).
    c. He is explicit that Joseph is "dead" (v. 20; cf. 42.13, 32); this is the first time Joseph has heard this.

d. Significantly, Judah does not resist the special love Jacob had for Rachel's sons; he appeals to that love for Benjamin in his effort to see the boy freed.

15. Finally, he offers to remain in place of Benjamin—for the sake of Jacob (vv. 33–34).
    a. Once again, he is seeking to save the life of the younger brother (cf. 37.26–27), but this time to actually take his place.
    b. "Here is the moral high point of Judah's career" (Mathews 2025, 21,446).

Some Things to Think About

16. As we reflect on this important chapter, we note first that "twenty [plus] years of unresolved conflict between the brothers [is] reconciled on this critical day of testing" (Mathews 2005, 21,265).

17. While it is simplistic to sum up Judah as a hero or villain, we can say that he "has undergone a moral reformation" (Mathews 2005, 21,168)
    a. This did not occur in a single event, but was the result of the cumulative effect of life's ups and downs.
    b. In other words, Judah experienced *growth over time*—precisely the way growth occurs in you and me (see 2 Pet 3.18; cf. Eph 4.13–16).

18. But the story is not over; chapter 44 leaves us hanging.
    a. "The unit ends with everything open. The speech of Judah (44.18–34) is unanswered. The family has gone deeper and deeper into its deathly game. Now Benjamin, the focus of the brothers, of the father and of Joseph, is in jeopardy. The brothers are terrified. The father must wait at a distance. With everything unsettled, only a fear of the evil all this may bring is present at this point in the scene (44:34)" (Brueggemann 1982, 342).

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