

SUNDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY
WEEK 13: Genesis 42 – The Visit of the Ten Brothers

THE JOSEPH STORY UP TO THIS POINT

So, Joseph makes it big in the land of Egypt. What his brothers meant for harm, God uses to bless not only Joseph, but all of Egypt and eventually Joseph's family. Despite all that happens to him, Joseph is portrayed as maintaining his closeness and dependence upon God. He may be given an Egyptian name, wear the Pharaoh's signet ring, and dress in Egyptian clothes, but his new role in the kingdom of Egypt comes, self-admittedly, from God. Now several years have passed and Joseph is second in command in Egypt, having correctly interpreted Pharaoh's dreams and has prepared Egypt for the worldwide famine; stockpiling grain in the years of plenty so that it is available to be sold in the years of famine. Meanwhile, Joseph's family remains in Canaan when the famine hits.

SOURCE THEORY – DOCUMENTARY HYPOTHESIS

This chapter is primarily Elohist (E source) with portions of the Yahwist (J source) version of the brothers' journey in verses 5-6a, 26-28, 38 (see italicized verses below).

Genesis 42 (NRSV)

¹ When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you keep looking at one another?

² I have heard," he said, "that there is grain in Egypt; go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die."

³ So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. ⁴ But Jacob did not send Joseph's brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he feared that harm might come to him. ⁵ *Thus the sons of Israel were among the other people who came to buy grain, for the famine had reached the land of Canaan.*

⁶ *Now Joseph was governor over the land; it was he who sold to all the people of the land.* And Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground. ⁷ When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke harshly to them. "Where do you come from?" he said. They said, "From the land of Canaan, to buy food." ⁸ Although Joseph had recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him.

⁹ Joseph also remembered the dreams that he had dreamed about them. He said to them, "You are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land!" ¹⁰ They said to him, "No, my lord; your servants have come to buy food. ¹¹ We are all sons of one man; we are honest men; your servants have never been spies." ¹² But he said to them, "No, you have come to see the nakedness of the land!" ¹³ They said, "We, your servants, are twelve brothers, the sons of a certain man in the land of Canaan; the youngest, however, is now with our father, and one is no more." ¹⁴ But Joseph said to them, "It is just as I have said to you; you are spies!

¹⁵ Here is how you shall be tested: as Pharaoh lives, you shall not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here! ¹⁶ Let one of you go and bring your brother, while the rest of you remain in prison, in order that your words may be tested, whether there is truth in you; or else, as Pharaoh lives, surely you are spies." ¹⁷ And he put them all together in prison for three days. ¹⁸ On the third day Joseph said to them, "Do this and you will live, for I fear God: ¹⁹ if you are honest men, let one of your brothers stay here where you are imprisoned. The rest of you shall go and carry grain for the famine of your households, ²⁰ and bring your youngest brother to me. Thus your words will be verified, and you shall not die." And they agreed to do so.

²¹ They said to one another, "Alas, we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother; we saw his anguish when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen. That is why this anguish has come upon us." ²² Then Reuben answered them, "Did I not tell you not to wrong the boy? But you would not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood."

²³ They did not know that Joseph understood them, since he spoke with them through an interpreter.

²⁴ He turned away from them and wept; then he returned and spoke to them. And he picked out Simeon and had him bound before their eyes.

²⁵ Joseph then gave orders to fill their bags with grain, to return every man's money to his sack, and to give them provisions for their journey. This was done for them. ²⁶ *They loaded their donkeys with their grain, and departed.*

²⁷ When one of them opened his sack to give his donkey fodder at the lodging place, he saw his money at the top of the sack. ²⁸ He said to his brothers, "My money has been put back; here it is in my sack!" At this they lost heart and turned trembling to one another, saying, "What is this that God has done to us?"

²⁹ When they came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had happened to them, saying, ³⁰ "The man, the lord of the land, spoke harshly to us, and charged us with spying on the land. ³¹ But we said to him, 'We are honest men, we are not spies. ³² We are twelve brothers, sons of our father; one is no more, and the youngest is now with our father in the land of Canaan.' ³³ Then the man, the lord of the land, said to us, 'By this I shall know that you are honest men: leave one of your brothers with me, take grain for the famine of your households, and go your way. ³⁴ Bring your youngest brother to me, and I shall know that you are not spies but honest men. Then I will release your brother to you, and you may trade in the land.'"

³⁵ As they were emptying their sacks, there in each one's sack was his bag of money. When they and their father saw their bundles of money, they were dismayed. ³⁶ And their father Jacob said to them, "I am the one you have bereaved of children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and now you would take Benjamin. All this has happened to me!" ³⁷ Then Reuben said to his father, "You may kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you. Put him in my hands, and I will bring him back to you." ³⁸ But he said, "My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he alone is left. If harm should come to him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol."

OUTLINE OF CHAPTER 42

Genesis 42:1-5	The Reason – Famine all over but there is grain in Egypt
Genesis 42:6-8	The Recognition – Joseph recognizes his brothers, but they don't recognize him
Genesis 42:9-14	The Ruse – Joseph accuses them of being spies
Genesis 42:15-20	The Requirement – Joseph demands that they bring back Benjamin; Simeon held hostage
Genesis 42:21-23	The Remorse – They understand that they are being punished for selling Joseph into slavery
Genesis 42:24	The Restraint – Joseph leaves to weep to hide his identity
Genesis 42:25-28	The Return – The nine brothers return to Canaan with their food and their money
Genesis 42:29-38	The Review – Jacob's sons tell him about their trip and the need to bring Benjamin on returning

THE REASON

Two men are in a boat... Pete and Repeat. Pete falls out. Who's left? Repeat.

Two men are in a boat... Pete and Repeat. Pete falls out. Who's left? Repeat.

Two men are in a boat...

Once again, we see the repetition of a theme: the people of God head to Egypt because of a famine (see Genesis 12). And just like that earlier story where Sarah is a "guest" in Pharaoh's house, Joseph's brothers will soon find themselves in an awkward situation in Pharaoh's house. That same scene comes home to roost in the book of Exodus when the Israelites are slaves to Pharaoh.

Joseph's brothers (minus Benjamin) come to Egypt to buy grain and they meet with Joseph, who is now the one in charge of rationing the food. Jacob (the now over-protective father) was afraid to send Benjamin with his older brothers and so Benjamin remained behind in Canaan (verse 4).

THE RECOGNITION

Joseph recognizes his brothers immediately, but they don't recognize him (he now dresses like an Egyptian, talks like an Egyptian, and walks like an Egyptian). In fulfillment of the dream he had as a boy (see Genesis 37:5-11), they bow down to him (verse 6).

THE RUSE

Fortunately for his brothers, Joseph isn't focused on revenge, but he does assert his power over them and threatens them with death (verse 20). Instead of revenge, he develops an elaborate ruse to test his brothers. Apparently, trickery runs in the family; this apple doesn't fall very far from the tree.

THE REQUIREMENT

Joseph sets up the long con to see whether his brothers will abandon or protect Benjamin. Out of love will they protect him? Or, out of jealousy will they seize the opportunity to abandon him here in Egypt, like they did to Joseph? He accuses them over and over again of being spies.

In response, the brothers claim to be “honest men” (verse 11) and refer to Joseph as “my lord” (verse 10) and to themselves as “your servants” (three times in verses 10-13) in fulfillment of Joseph’s dream. Although there are only ten of them, they say that they are twelve brothers from Canaan, their youngest brother remains with their father and the other “one is no more.”

Finally, Joseph insists on the test. And, most importantly, declares “I fear God” (verse 18). They think that Joseph is testing whether or not they are lying about being spies and having another brother. But Joseph wants to see Benjamin and he wants to see what his brothers will do with him. He puts them in prison for three days and instead of keeping all but one, he only keeps Simeon in prison and sends the others home.

THE REMORSE

They see a connection between what is happening to them and what they had done to Joseph and the guilt gets to them. Joseph hears them speaking and understands what they are saying, but he has been speaking all this time through an interpreter. As he listens, he hears Reuben’s declaration of blame and innocence (see verse 22). Remember, Reuben was surprised at what his brothers had done. He had had them throw Joseph into the pit so that he could come back and rescue him later (see Genesis 37: 21-22, 29-30).

THE RESTRAINT

Hearing their talk and their confession of guilt, Joseph excuses himself and weeps out of love for his brothers.

THE RETURN

After three days in prison, Joseph has a change of heart and allows all but one to return to Canaan to bring food to their father and to fetch Benjamin. Joseph chooses Simeon, the second oldest brother behind Reuben. And he raises the stakes by having the money they used to pay for the grain back in their bags. When they return and find the money, they are fearful because they had claimed to be honest.

THE REVIEW

They tell their father the story of their trip and report on why Simeon is no longer with them. Reuben makes a pledge to bring his brothers back safe and sound on the lives of his own sons. But Jacob refuses to send Benjamin back with them saying that he would die with sorrow if Benjamin didn’t return.

The Geological Distribution of the Sons of Noah



OTHER TERMS

Canaan (כְּנַעַן) from the Hebrew root כנע meaning “to have to submit, to be humbled, to humble oneself, to humble somebody.” Canaan is the son of Ham and the grandson of Noah. He is first encountered in the story of Noah’s drunkenness (Gen. 9:18–27). Noah becomes drunk, lies uncovered in a tent, and his son Ham sees him naked. In retribution for this impropriety, Noah curses Ham’s son Canaan. Canaan is to be a slave to Ham’s brothers, Shem and Japheth. Key questions: Why is Canaan cursed rather than his father Ham? And what is the implication of the curse for Canaan and his descendants? Answer: Whose land will be taken away and given to the descendants of Shem?

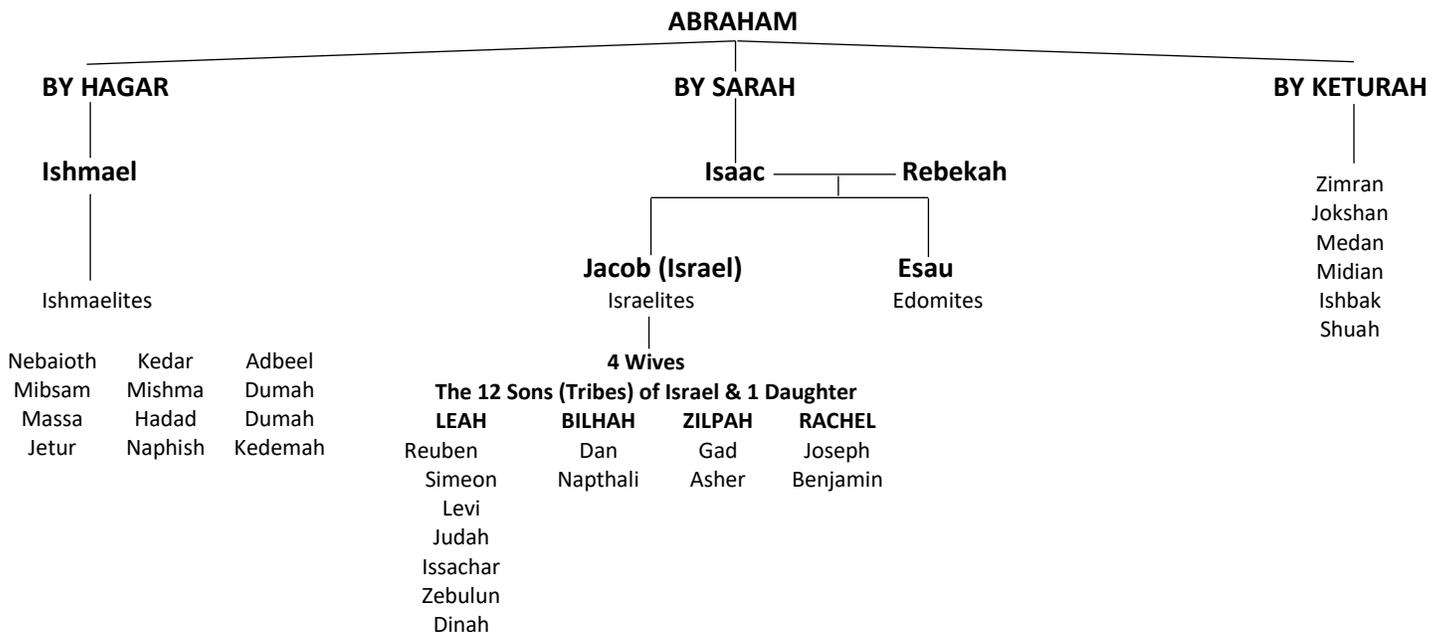
By the time of the Joseph story in Genesis, Canaan is now the name of the territory along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean encompassing modern Lebanon, part of southern Syria, and most of Palestine west of the Jordan (see Numbers 34:1-12 for the boundaries of the land).

Sheol a biblical term for the netherworld, in some respects the Hebrew counterpart of Hades and Tartarus. The etymology of the word is still in question, but “Sheol” probably derives from the verb “to ask or inquire” and thus refers to the realm of the dead as the place from which oracles were sought. The seeking of such oracles was forbidden by the Torah (Deut. 18:11), but was apparently practiced (1 Sam. 28:3–25).

Sheol usually refers to a place (Gen. 37:35), namely, the underworld where departed spirits go (Prov. 9:18). The dead in Sheol are referred to as “shades,” pale reflections of the men and women they had once been (Isa. 14:10; Eccles. 9:10). Existence in Sheol is characterized by forgetfulness and inactivity (Ps. 88:12; Eccles. 9:10), but Sheol is not a place of punishment in the Bible. Rescue from Sheol is a recurring theme in biblical poetry (Ps. 30:3; 49:15; 86:13; cf. 18:3–16; 116:3–8; Jon. 2:2–9). In some cases, this may indicate deliverance from a near-death experience, but eventually such texts would be read as expressive of hope for resurrection, life beyond death.

A few biblical texts preserve a metaphorical sense in which Sheol is personified as a being or power that can destroy the living (Job 26:6). Sheol is then portrayed as insatiable with an immense, devouring mouth (Isa. 5:14; Prov. 30:15–16).¹

THE GENEALOGY OF ABRAHAM



NEXT WEEK: Read Genesis 43-44

¹ Michael Fishbane, “Sheol,” ed. Mark Allan Powell, *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary (Revised and Updated)* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 950.