

## Genesis 42 The First Visit to Egypt

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### Overview

Joseph ascends to power in three cycles, marked by favor from a powerful patron (Jacob, Potiphar, keeper of the prison), followed by opposition and humiliation, then a recognition that God is with him:

- ch 37-39, sold into slavery in Egypt
- ch 39-40, falsely accused and imprisoned
- ch 40-41, exalted to vizier

Similarly, his interactions with his family build around three journeys to Egypt:

- ch 42, accusation
- ch 43-45, test and unveiling
- ch 46-50, reunion

These chapters have several recurring themes:

- Common chronological structure:
  - preparation,
  - interaction with Joseph,
  - an emphasis on his bounty to them,
  - return to Canaan
- Joseph's family bows down to him in fulfillment of the dreams in ch 37: 42:6, 43:26,28; 47:31.
- Joseph's weeping: more than anyone else in Genesis. He never weeps during his time of humiliation, but repeatedly weeps after he is promoted, during the process of reconciliation with his family: 42:24, 43:30, 45:14, 15, 46:29, 50:1, 17. This tenderness will remind us repeatedly that the steps he takes to humble and correct his brothers are not the result of hardheartedness on his part, but a conscientious, loving action needed to restore the family.

Ch. 42 concerns the first visit of Joseph's brothers to Egypt, in which Joseph recognizes his brothers and, led by the dreams God gave him in his youth, begins to restore the broken fellowship between them.

### 1-4, Preparation: Jacob Sends his Sons to Egypt

We see here something more of the character of Jacob and his sons reflected. Note two contrasts:

**Jacob vs. his sons.**—Consider the different reactions of Jacob and his sons, in the face of the famine.

- they “look one upon another,” with no clear notion of what to do.
- Jacob proposes a course of action.

Jacob exemplifies several qualities from the book of Proverbs:

- Alertness: Prov 27:23 “Be thou diligent to know the state of thy flocks, *and* look well to thy herds.” He is aware that something is wrong; he understands the consequences of the famine.
- Decisiveness: Prov 22:3 “A prudent *man* foreseeth the evil, and hideth himself: but the simple pass on, and are punished.” He takes action appropriate to the coming danger.
- Action: Prov 6:9 “How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? when wilt thou arise out of thy sleep? 10 *Yet* a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep: 11 So shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man.” He is willing to exert energy and take risks to remedy the problem.

In this respect, he exemplifies the qualities later desired by Pharaoh, when (after Jacob’s arrival in Egypt) he invites Joseph concerning his brethren, “if thou knowest *any* men of activity among them, then make them rulers over my cattle” (47:6). The expression “men of activity” is more commonly translated “valiant men” or “men of valour,” in military contexts. It reflects those qualities of alertness, decisiveness, and action that are essential to effective management.

Clearly, Joseph reflects his father’s abilities in this area more than do his brothers.

**Benjamin vs. the other sons.**—A journey such as this was fraught with risks in the ancient world, particularly since the sons, like other travelers to Egypt, would be carrying wealth to use in buying grain, and would be a likely target for bandits. The circumstances require that they face this risk, and it is wiser that they travel as a group to discourage attacks against them. But Jacob retains Benjamin at home. Benjamin is the only remaining son of his favorite wife, and Jacob is not willing to expose him to the risks of the road.

(Is he also aware of some tensions between Rachel’s sons and the sons of the other wives, such as had arisen with Joseph?)

## 5, The Trip

The trip is uneventful. The sons of Jacob are not alone; the famine has driven many from Canaan to seek food in Egypt.

## 6-26, Interaction with Joseph

### 6, Setting

**governor ... sold.**—The juxtaposition of these terms is interesting. “Governor” is a word that indicates his absolute authority. Yet we find him involved directly in the sale of grain, a task that he might well have appointed to functionaries. He is involved hands-on in the operation of the graineries.

- This is a trait of a good manager.

- In addition, when he saw Semites arriving from Canaan, it may have occurred to him that his family might make the trip, and he may have been on the lookout for them.

**Bowed down themselves.**—In each of the three trips to Egypt, we find Joseph’s family fulfilling the dreams of ch. 37. The first two times it is his brothers, as predicted in the dream of the sheaves (37:7); the third time, his father, fulfilling the dream of the sun, moon, and stars (37:9). In both dreams, the verb “made obeisance” is the same as the one here translated “bowed down.”

### **7-17, Initial Encounter**

**7-8, Initial recognition.**—Joseph recognizes his brethren. The chiasmic reference to his recognition suggests that his initial suspicions of who they are confirmed when he learns they come from Canaan, and when he hears their voices (perhaps their dialect). But they do not recognize him.

**9, remembered the dreams.**—Moses wants us to understand that Joseph’s actions toward his brothers are guided by the dreams the Lord gave him twenty years before.

- It’s interesting that he remembers the dreams, not his suffering at the hands of his brothers. In fact, we have already been told that he has forgotten the hardships he suffered in his father’s house (41:51, “For God ... hath made me forget all my toil, and all my father’s house”). He is guided, not by a personal desire for revenge, but by God’s revelation.
- He has seen an initial evidence of the fulfillment of the dream in their prostration before him. Yet they do not recognize him as the one to whom they are bowing, and the dream suggests that they should *knowingly* bow down to him.

If he had revealed himself as their brother at this point, he would face a dilemma. If he were harsh with them, while they knew him as their brother, they would think him vengeful. If he greeted them cordially, they would not bow down willingly to him. To follow the guidance in the dream, he must serve as God’s agent to chastise and humble them, before revealing to them who he is.

The same logic suggests why he could not contact his father after his promotion. It would force a choice between forsaking the prophecy and appearing personally spiteful. To be God’s agent in reforming his brothers, he must do so incognito.

Compare the successive iterations of questioning. Both times he emphasizes that their motives are malevolent. Their second response amplifies and focuses their claim in the first response that they are the sons of a single man:

**Ye are spies.**—This charge is appropriate to his purpose of humbling his brothers, from two perspectives.

1. It reflects a natural concern for any nation dealing with foreigners. Thus it will be a credible charge to the brothers.
2. It places them in a position where they may be tempted to betray one another in order to escape. Thus it tests their loyalty to one another.

**11 One man’s sons.**—They respond that they are all brothers. In a culture that treasures continuity of family line, it would be unreasonable for an entire family to risk its future in a

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Joseph		12 Nay,
	9 Ye <i>are</i> spies;	
	to see the nakedness of the land ye are come.	but to see the nakedness of the land ye are come.
Brothers	10 Nay, my lord,	
	but to buy food are thy servants come.	
	11 We <i>are</i> all one man's sons;	13 Thy servants <i>are</i> twelve brethren, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan; and, behold, the youngest <i>is</i> this day with our father, and one <i>is</i> not.
	we <i>are</i> true <i>men</i> , thy servants are no spies.	

spying venture. When Joseph presses them, this is the point upon which they insist, and in the process, they elaborate on the two missing sons—Joseph and Benjamin.

**15 your youngest brother.**—Joseph is particularly concerned to see Benjamin. Is he really OK? After all that Joseph suffered from the jealousy of his brothers over his privileged position as Rachel’s son, how would Benjamin fare? Have they abused him? Is he really “with his father”?

**17 all together into ward three days.**—His initial demand is that all of them remain in prison while one returns for Benjamin, and to heighten their sense of his seriousness, he casts them all into jail for a period.

**18-24, Final Resolution**

This paragraph gives us insight into both Joseph and the brothers. Joseph is the focus at the beginning and end, while the brothers are at the middle. In the first Joseph section, the focus is on his vertical attitude (toward God), while in the second, we learn of his true feelings toward his brothers.

*18-20, Joseph (Vertical)*

During their incarceration, Joseph has been meditating before the Lord. When he sees them again, he has revised his demands, and explains both the revision and the motive.

**18 I fear God.**—As with Pharaoh (41:16, 25, 28, 32), and apparently with Potiphar and the jailor before him (39:3, 23), Joseph’s policy is to give glory to God for his decisions and successes. This must have been something of a surprise to the brothers. The patriarchs were fearful of moving among gentiles who did not fear God (20:11). And in fact the fear of God, the sense that he is the ultimate judge and we must give an account to him, is the only effective bridle to human selfishness and abuse of power.

Here the most powerful man in Egypt acknowledges that he is under divine authority and must answer, not to Pharaoh, but to God. How blessed all nations would be if their rulers had such a consciousness.

There is particular instruction for them in this comment of Joseph’s, for they manifestly do *not* fear God, at least not in the behavior they have manifested so far. Joseph perhaps offers them this

confession to encourage them in the midst of the discipline he is inflicting on them, but we will see that they do not get the point.

**19 Let one ... be bound.**—Instead of binding nine and sending one back, he will bind one and send nine back. Not only is this more humane, in minimizing the number who must be confined, but it also permits those who return to carry more grain back for their families: “carry corn for the famine of your houses.” Even while disciplining his brothers, he must provide for the family as a whole. God is showing him that this is the very reason he has been sent to Egypt (a consciousness finally articulated in 45:5, 7; 50:20). He can fulfill this mission better by sending more grain back now.

### *21-22, Brothers*

**And they did so.**—The reference of this clause is obscure. There are three options:

1. Wenham translates “consented.” 45:21 might also have this sense, but it does not fit the natural flow of almost all examples.
2. The reference might be to their subsequent return, in which case this is *wiederaufnamen* with v.26.
3. Waltke: refers to their process of selecting a brother to leave behind. This is probably the best, even though they do not explicitly discuss this in 21-22.

**21 And they said.**—As a group, they recall their treatment of Joseph. Here they recall what Moses did not record in ch. 37, his anguish and forlorn pleas.

It is remarkable how a few days of suffering can awaken their consciences after 22 years of oversight. This is another instance of the principle we have often seen in Scripture, that when God’s judgments are in the earth, then the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness (Isa 26:9). So we should welcome the adversity that God permits in our lives, that it might purge out from us the defilements of the flesh and lead us toward our objective of Christlikeness.

**22 Reuben answered.**—His “I told you so” attitude doesn’t seem particularly helpful here. What is going on? Several possibilities.

- Perhaps as eldest son he must moderate the proceedings and confirm their analysis of the situation.
- If the larger context of the discussion is selecting who will stay behind, perhaps he is presenting this as an argument why it ought not be he.
- Recall 37:30, his sense of personal responsibility when he found Joseph gone. Again as eldest son, he may have had to answer for Joseph’s absence, and now must report to his father about the latest developments.

Note the passive voice of their comments: “this distress is come upon us” (21), “his blood is required” (22). They are beginning to see a link between their conduct toward Joseph and their current misfortune, but they do not acknowledge God as the one who is holding them responsible. And we have no indication of their mental state—they must have been disturbed, but Moses presents them as calm and analytic.

### *23-25, Joseph (Horizontal, toward his brothers): His Bounty*

Three actions show his attitude toward his brothers.

**He .. wept.**—Here we learn that his action toward them is corrective, not vindictive. This is the first of the numerous references to Joseph’s weeping, which show his true love for them.

**He ... took from them Simeon.**—Why choose Simeon? They may have nominated Simeon in response to his instruction in v.19. Perhaps the Lord ordered it this way because Simeon, who led the raid on the people of Shechem in ch. 34, was marked by special cruelty and thus most appropriate for this additional discipline. In any event, Joseph is true to his revised plan of action to restrain only one of them.

**Then Joseph commanded.**—He will not take their money. He provides freely for them. They are after all his family, and he sees that his mission is to feed them, not profit from them. Common customers would receive only the grain for which they had paid. He gives them also “provision for the way,” as well as returning their money.

### **27-28, Return Trip**

It is critical to note that each visit to Egypt, including the last one with the entire family, ends with a return to Canaan. Egypt is a place of temporary provision for them, not a new home.

On the way home, one of the brothers discovers his money. Two details about this discovery can be deduced.

1. This was probably near the end of the journey. Joseph had given them separate provisions for the trip, and only when these were exhausted would they even consider dipping into the grain they had purchased. One of the brothers’ traveling provisions have run low; his asses were particularly hungry, and so he opens one of the regular bags.
2. They probably had many bags. To make reasonable provision for Jacob’s large family, they must have had a large drove of asses, each carrying several bags. Only ten of these bags will have held money, so it’s easy to understand how only one brother discovered it.

**28 their heart failed them.**—The substance of their fear is that it looks as though they have taken the grain without paying for it. They fear that their reputation with Joseph is damaged, and he will be even more harsh with them if they return. Note the progress in their thinking over vv. 21-22.

- Instead of the passive verbs there, we see active verbs. No longer are they saying, “bad things happen to us”; now they realize that God is doing these things to them.
- Moses emphasizes the emotional pain they feel: “their heart failed them ... they were afraid.” They are beginning to attain to the level of sensitivity that Joseph confessed in v. 18.
- The bottom line is that they beginning to fear God.

### **29-38, Report to Jacob**

**29-45, their report.**—Their report closely follows the events reported earlier. As always, it pays to notice how such parallel accounts differ.

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Original Account	Report to Jacob
9 And Joseph ... said unto them,	30 The man, <i>who is</i> the lord of the land, spake roughly to us,
Ye <i>are</i> spies; to see the nakedness of the land ye are come. ... 12 And he said unto them, Nay, but to see the nakedness of the land ye are come.	and took us for spies of the country.
10 And they said unto him,	31 And we said unto him,
Nay, my lord, but to buy food are thy servants come.	
we <i>are</i> true <i>men</i> , thy servants are no spies.	We <i>are</i> true <i>men</i> ; we are no spies:
11 We <i>are</i> all one man's sons; ... 13 And they said, Thy servants <i>are</i> twelve brethren, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan;	32 We <i>be</i> twelve brethren, sons of our father;
and, behold, the youngest <i>is</i> this day with our father, and one <i>is</i> not.	one <i>is</i> not, and the youngest <i>is</i> this day with our father in the land of Canaan.
14 And Joseph said unto them, That <i>is it</i> that I spake unto you, saying, Ye <i>are</i> spies: 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 <i>there be any</i> truth in you: or else by the life of Pharaoh surely ye <i>are</i> spies. 17 And he put them all together into ward three days.	
18 And Joseph said unto them the third day,	33 And the man, the lord of the country, said unto us,
This do, and live; <i>for</i> I fear God:	
19 If ye <i>be</i> true <i>men</i> ,	Hereby shall I know that ye <i>are</i> true <i>men</i> ;
let one of your brethren be bound in the house of your prison:	leave one of your brethren <i>here</i> with me,
go ye, carry corn for the famine of your houses:	and take <i>food for</i> the famine of your households, and be gone:
But bring your youngest brother unto me;	34 And bring your youngest brother unto me:
so shall your words be verified,	then shall I know that ye <i>are</i> no spies, but <i>that</i> ye <i>are</i> true <i>men</i> :

and ye shall not die.	so will I deliver you your brother, and ye shall traffick in the land.
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- They reverse the order in which they mention the other two sons between 13 and 32. They want to delay as long as possible telling Jacob how they revealed that they had another son.
- They try to make the situation in Egypt seem less severe than it is.
  - They make no mention of their three days in jail (14-17).
  - 19, 33, They change Joseph’s demand that Simeon be bound (19) into a request that he remain (33), as though he were an honored guest
  - They change the benefit of compliance with Joseph’s order from escaping execution (19) into freedom to trade (34).
- They make no mention of Joseph’s claim that he fears God (18). This omission shows their lack of spiritual sensitivity. Had they been spiritual men, they would have grasped at this one bright light in their interaction with Joseph, and certainly reported it to their father. That they do not shows that they did not appreciate it.

**35, the money.**—When they opened their sacks, they found their money, and were afraid. For them, the discovery heightens the fear of Joseph’s wrath that they felt in 27-28 when they discovered the first bag of money. One commentator argues that “Jacob’s outburst .. implies that his fear differs from [theirs]. ... Two strange disclosures have been sprung on him in quick succession. Simeon’s disappearance and the money’s appearance—Jacob refuses to accept them as coincidences. A tight causal explanation, clearing up one mystery in terms of another, suggests itself to him: the brothers have sold Simeon into slavery and are now pretending to be dismayed only to cover their tracks and lay the ground for another coup [selling Benjamin].” (quoted in Wenham)

**36, Jacob’s outburst.**—Note that he blames them implicitly for the loss of Joseph. He may harbor doubts about their story of the wild beast.

- He blames them for bereaving him of both Joseph and Simeon.
- The pronoun “me” is in an unusual emphatic position at the beginning of the sentence, and is repeated at the end. They don’t really regret the loss of these two sons—only he bears the burden.

**37, Reuben’s response.**—Jacob’s accusation strikes terribly deep. “The brothers are trapped by their past lies and their presently aroused consciences” (Wenham). They cannot deny what Jacob says, because it is half true. Neither can they say, “well, Dad, we did do away with Joseph, but this time what we say about Simeon is true.” So Reuben erupts in thoughtless anger. “Have I taken your two sons? Then take my two sons.” This is an emotional outburst, not a reasonable proposition. The Jewish commentator Kimchi catches this by having Joseph say, “Stupid firstborn! Are they your sons and not my sons?” (quoted by Alter).

**38, Jacob’s decision.**—Jacob’s response shows clearly his favoritism for Rachel’s children and the resulting cleavage within the family.

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- Benjamin is “my son.” The rest of them don’t count.
- Because Joseph is dead (as he thinks), Benjamin is left alone. Again, the others are forgotten.

He would rather the whole family perish of hunger than that Benjamin be placed in risk. Clearly, he has yet some spiritual lessons to learn as well.

### Notes

#### ***The brothers’ progressive reformation***

Trace the sequence of statements that they make during the course of their reunion with Joseph.

7 And Joseph ... said unto them, Whence come ye? And they said, From the land of Canaan to buy food. ...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. ... 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.

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.

27 And as one of them opened his sack to give his ass provender in the inn, he espied his money; for, behold, it *was* in his sack's mouth. 28 And he said unto his brethren, My money is restored; and, lo, *it is* even in my sack: and their heart failed *them*, and they were afraid, saying one to another, What *is* this *that* God hath done unto us?