

Frequently Asked Questions About the Old Testament

SESSION 3 – GENESIS 32-50

Is Jacob really wrestling with God? How can this be if God is a Spirit (32:22-32)?

Jacob's wrestling with an angel epitomizes the whole of Jacob's life. He had struggled with his brother (chapters 25, 27), his father (chapter 27), and his father-in-law (chapters 29-31), and now he struggles with God (ch. 32). Jacob's own words express the substance of these narratives about him: *"I will not let you go unless you bless me."* Here is a graphic picture of Jacob struggling for the blessing—struggling with God and with a man (32:28).

Significantly, Jacob emerges victorious in his struggle. His victory, even in his struggle with God, came when the angel "blessed him." The importance of the name "Peniel" is that it identifies the one with whom Jacob was wrestling as God. Jacob's remark that he had seen God face to face did not necessarily mean that the "man" he wrestled with was in fact God. Rather, when one saw the "angel of the Lord," it was appropriate to say that he had seen the face of God.

—NIV Bible Commentary

Was there more to the special robe that Joseph received than just a fancy piece of clothing? His brothers were very angry, was something else going on behind the scenes (ch. 37)?

There was a ceremony involving such robes in the Ancient Near East that marked the recipient as the father's primary heir. Joseph, the eleventh son in the family lineage takes the rights of the firstborn. Joseph gets the farm. When he receives this special robe, the situation is packed with emotions because

the whole family inheritance is at stake. This was a volatile moment because the older boys would have clearly seen that Joseph had been placed before all of them. This was a recipe for sibling civil war, and that is exactly what happened.

–John Ortberg

Why did God put some people to death (38:7-10)?

It may seem that God is arbitrary in his punishment. Some men and women have been executed for what seem to be minor offenses; others – perverse criminals – have been allowed to wallow in their wickedness. Why is it that God sometimes appears inconsistent in his discipline?

The Bible reminds us that God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He wants every person to take responsibility for his or her own wrongdoing and to turn from it (Ezek. 33:11). On the other hand, God in his wisdom chooses to make examples of some people, and that may have been the case with the men in these verses. Their punishment reminds us that even relatively minor offenses separate us from God. Perhaps God allows some of the wicked to live because he wants to give them time to turn from their evil ways, no matter how deeply depraved they may appear to be. He has tolerated the corruption of some for decades or even a lifetime. Some of the most evil people in history have turned from their immoral ways to become great builders of God's kingdom. The apostle Paul is an example of such a person.

–*The Quest Study Bible*

What is this business of a brother lying with his deceased brother's wife to bear children? Was that God's plan (38:8)?

This was a custom of the day intended to perpetuate the line of a deceased brother and provide for the needs of his widow. This was later defined in the Mosaic Law so that the brother could back out of the responsibility, but not without some shame (Deuteronomy 25:5-10).

–*The Quest Study Bible*

Why would God allow Joseph to be forgotten (40:23)?

Although God may allow people to forget those who have helped them, God never forgets those who belong to him. Perhaps this was a time of spiritual development for Joseph. Although nothing negative is said about Joseph in this account, his heart might not have been ready for the responsibilities God had in

store for him.

– The Quest Study Bible

Why would God speak to a “non-believer” like Pharaoh (41:16)?

God will work through anyone to accomplish his purposes. Earlier there was Abimelech, the Philistine king to whom God spoke in a dream (Genesis 20:3-7). God influenced mighty leaders like the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar (Jeremiah 25:9), an unnamed Assyrian king (Isaiah 10:5-12) and Cyrus, the founder of the Persian empire (Isaiah 45:1), to accomplish his will.

– The Quest Study Bible

Did Pharaoh come to believe in the true God (41:37-39)?

Probably not. Pharaoh uses the word “Elohim,” a generic name for God that could also be translated “gods.” Here Pharaoh did not necessarily make a confession of faith, but probably only referred to a god or gods generally, according to his understanding. The word “spirit” in verse 38 is therefore typically not capitalized, since reference to the Holy Spirit would be out of character in statements by pagan rulers.

– NIV Study Bible

Was Joseph wrong to marry the daughter of a pagan priest (41:45)?

The text makes no judgment about this marriage. In the context of Genesis 41, Joseph’s marriage appears positive, underscoring the power and prestige Joseph had gained in Egypt. The marriage was apparently another blessing from God, along with all the other good things happening to him.

– The Quest Study Bible

What kind of divination did Joseph do (44:15)?

“Divination” is the attempt to obtain secret knowledge, especially of the future, either by inspiration (Acts 16:16) or by the reading and interpreting of certain signs called omens. The divination was accomplished by placing oil drops upon water and observing the resulting patterns. Divining God’s will through dreams, the budding of plants, sheep fleeces and the casting of lots was not condemned in the Old Testament. People believed God was totally in control and spoke through these means. The Mosaic Law does not forbid divination, but it condemns consulting the dead through “mediums.”

– The NIV Bible Dictionary and The Quest Study Bible

Why did the sons of Israel stay in Egypt after the famine (50:22)?

Perhaps the Israelites enjoyed the prosperity and goodness of Egypt. Canaan was more on the frontier, less stable politically and perhaps not as fertile. Since the Israelites lived in Egypt throughout Joseph's lifetime (three generations), they were probably more familiar with Egypt. Also, they may have had some obligation to Pharaoh. Everyone in Pharaoh's land would in some way be indebted to him, even though we see no indication of their slavery until the book of Exodus. Though Joseph knew he would die and not see the time when his sons returned to the land, he nevertheless expressed clearly the hope and trust that he had in God's promise: "God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." As has been characteristic of the literary technique of the Joseph narratives, Joseph repeated a second time (cf. 41:32) his statement of trust in God's promise: "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place."

– The Quest Study Bible and the NIV Bible Commentary