

*Genesis 44; Mark 14; Job 10; Romans 14*



UP TO THIS POINT IN THE NARRATIVE (Gen. 44), Judah has not appeared in a very good light. When Joseph's brothers first declare their intention to kill him (Gen. 37:19-20), two of them offer alternatives. Reuben suggests that Joseph should simply be thrown into a pit from which he could not escape (37:21-22). This proposal had two advantages. First, murder could not then be *directly* ascribed to the brothers, and second, Reuben hoped to come back later, in secret, and rescue his kid brother. Reuben was devastated when his plan did not work out (37:29-30). The other brother with an independent proposal was Judah. He argued that there was no profit in mere murder. It would be better to sell Joseph into slavery (37:25-27)—and his view prevailed.

Judah reappears in the next chapter, sleeping with his daughter-in-law (Gen. 38), and, initially at least, deploying a double standard (see meditation for February 6).

Yet here in Genesis 44, Judah cuts a more heroic figure. Joseph manipulates things to have Benjamin and his brothers arrested for theft, and insists that only Benjamin will have to remain in Egypt as a slave. Perhaps Joseph's ploy was designed to test his older brothers to see if they still resented the youngest, if they were still so hard that they could throw one of their number into slavery and chuckle that at least they themselves were free. It is Judah who intervenes, and pleads, of all things, the special love his father has for Benjamin. He even refers to Jacob's belief that Joseph was killed by wild animals (44:28), as if the sheer deceit and wickedness of it all had been preying on his mind for the previous quarter of a century. Judah explains how he himself promised to bring the boy back safely, and emotionally pleads, "Now then, please let your servant remain here as my lord's slave in the place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers. How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? No! Do not let me see the misery that would come upon my father" (44:33-34).

This is the high point in what we know of Judah's pilgrimage. He offers his life in substitution for another. Perhaps in part he was motivated by a guilty conscience; if so, the genuine heroism grew out of genuine shame. He could not know that in less than two millennia, his most illustrious descendant, in no way prompted by shame but only by obedience to his heavenly Father and by love for guilty rebels, would offer himself as a substitute for them (Mark 14).

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Genesis 45; Mark 15; Job 11; Romans 15



IN MARK 15 PEOPLE SPEAK better than they know.

“What shall I do, then,” Pilate asks, “with the one you call the king of the Jews?” (15:12). Of course, he utters the expression “king of the Jews” with a certain sneering contempt. When the crowd replies, “Crucify him!” (15:13, 14), the politically motivated think this is the end of another messianic pretender. They do not know that this king *has* to die, that his reign turns on his death, that he is simultaneously King and Suffering Servant.

The soldiers twist together a crown of thorns and jam it on his head. They hit him and spit on him, and then fall on their knees in mock homage, crying, “Hail, king of the Jews!” (15:18). In fact, he is more than the King of the Jews (though certainly not less). One day, each of those soldiers, and everyone else, will bow down before the resurrected man they mocked and crucified, and confess that he is Lord (Phil. 2:9-11).

Those who passed by could not resist hurling insults: “So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!” (15:29-30). The dismissive mockery hid the truth they could not see: earlier Jesus had indeed taught that he himself was the real temple, the anti-type of the building in Jerusalem, the ultimate meeting-place between God and human beings (John 2:19-22). Indeed, Jesus not only insisted that he is himself the temple, but that this is so by virtue of the fact that this temple must be destroyed and brought back to life in three days. If he had “come down from the cross” and saved himself, as his mockers put it, he could not have become the destroyed and rebuilt “temple” that reconciles men and women to God.

“He saved others but he can’t save himself” (15:31). Wrong again—and right again. This is the man who *voluntarily* goes to the cross (14:36; cf. John 10:18). To say “he can’t save himself” is ridiculously limiting. Yet he couldn’t save himself *and* save others. He saves others by *not* saving himself.

“Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe” (15:32). But what kind of Christ would they then have believed in? A powerful king, doubtless—but not the Redeemer, not the Sacrifice, not the Suffering Servant. They could not long have believed in him, for the basis of this transformation in them was the very cross-work they were taunting him to abandon.

“Surely this man was the Son of God” (15:39). Yes; more than they knew.

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*Genesis 46; Mark 16; Job 12; Romans 16*



ONE OF THE MOST DIFFICULT THINGS to grasp is that the God of the Bible is both personal—interacting with other persons—and transcendent (i.e., above space and time—the domain in which all our *personal* interactions with God take place). As the transcendent Sovereign, he rules over everything without exception; as the personal Creator, he interacts in personal ways with those who bear his image, disclosing himself to be not only personal but flawlessly good. How to put those elements together is finally beyond us, however frequently they are simply assumed in Scripture.

When Jacob hears that Joseph is alive, he offers sacrifices to God, who graciously discloses himself to Jacob once again: “I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again. And Joseph’s own hand will close your eyes” (*Gen. 46:3-4*).

The book of Genesis makes it clear that Jacob knew that God’s covenant with Abraham included the promise that the land where they were now settled would one day be given to him and to his descendants. That is why Jacob needed this direct disclosure from God to induce him to leave the land. Jacob was reassured on three fronts: (a) God would make his descendants multiply into a “great nation” during their sojourn in Egypt; (b) God would eventually bring them out of Egypt; (c) at the personal level, Jacob is comforted to learn that his long-lost son Joseph will attend his father’s death.

All of this provides personal comfort. It also discloses something of the mysteries of God’s providential sovereignty, for readers of the Pentateuch know that this sojourn in Egypt will issue in slavery, that God will then be said to “hear” the cries of his people, that in the course of time he will raise up Moses, who will be God’s agent in the ten plagues, the crossing of the Red Sea, the granting of the Sinai covenant and the giving of the law, the wilderness wanderings, and the (re)entry into the Promised Land. The sovereign God who brings Joseph down to Egypt to prepare the way for this small community of seventy persons has a lot of complex plans in store. These are designed to bring his people to the next stage of redemptive history, and finally to teach them that God’s words are more important than food (*Deut. 8*).

One can no more detach God’s sovereign transcendence from his personhood, or vice versa, than one can safely detach one wing from an airplane and still expect it to fly.

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*Genesis 47; Luke 1:1-38; Job 13; 1 Corinthians 1*

HOW DID THE CANONICAL Gospels come down to us?

At one level, it is enough to be assured that God provided them. But normally God operates through identifiable means. At no point do the canonical Gospels give the impression that they were handed down from heaven on golden plates, or transcribed by apostles attentive to divine dictation.

Luke provides the most detail as to how he went about his task (Luke 1:1-4). He tells us that “many” had already “undertaken to draw up an account” of Jesus’ life and ministry, in line with what was “handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word” (1:1-2). From this we can infer two things: (a) Luke does not himself claim to be an eyewitness of Jesus. He does claim to be in touch with what the original “eyewitnesses and servants of the word” handed down. (b) By the time he writes, Luke knows that already there are many written reports circulating. This is not surprising. The Jews were a literate race. Every boy learned to read and write. It is inconceivable that no one committed anything to paper in the first years after Jesus’ death, resurrection, and exaltation.

Then Luke tells us he himself “carefully investigated everything from the beginning.” The words suggest that he read the sources, talked with all the principals he could find, and evaluated the reports. We can glimpse at least a little of his method when we read his second volume, the book of Acts. There, by following his movements, we discover that he can be placed in all the early major Christian centers, where he would have the opportunity to talk to all of the earliest Christian leaders, and to read all of the earliest reports and archives. It is not too much of a leap, then, to infer that if Luke the doctor (see Col. 4:14) has some extra information about Mary’s unique pregnancy (Luke 1:26ff.), it is because he looked her up and had some long chats. In due course, then, he chose to write “an orderly account” (1:3).

Two things follow. First, however much the Spirit of God superintended the production of this gospel, such divine superintendence did not obviate the need for strenuous research and careful work. Second, this method of bringing a canonical book into being is entirely in line with its subject matter: God himself brought the messianic Son of David, the Son of God, into *this* world (1:35), the eternal invading the temporal, forever assuring that one could talk of him as a witness speaks of what is observed. The transmission of Christian truth necessarily rests, in part, not on mysticism, but on witness.

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 Genesis 48; Luke 1:39-80; Job 14; 1 Corinthians 2

SOMETIMES BAD THEOLOGY BREEDS reactionary bad theology. Because Roman Catholicism has gradually added more titles and myths to Mary, Protestants have sometimes reacted by remaining silent about her astonishing character. Neither approach fares very well when tested by this passage (Luke 1:39-80) and a few others we shall have occasion to think about.

Catholics have added titles such as “Mother of God” and “Queen of Heaven” to Mary, neither of which is found in the Bible. The view that Mary was immaculately conceived (and was therefore born sinless), and that she, like Enoch, was transported to heaven bodily, thereby escaping death, are equally unsupported. The latter became a dogma for Roman Catholics as recently as 1950. According to news reports, the current Pope is weighing whether he should establish, as something that *must* be confessed, another title conservative Catholics apply to Mary, viz. “Co-Redemptrix.”

But Luke’s witness points in another direction. In Mary’s song (1:46-55), traditionally called the *Magnificat* (from the Latin word for *magnifies*: “My soul magnifies [NIV—*glorifies*] the Lord”), Jesus’ mother says that her spirit rejoices in “God my Savior”—which certainly sounds as if she thought of herself as needing a Savior, which would be odd for one immaculately conceived. Indeed, a rapid scan of the Gospels discloses that during Jesus’ ministry, Mary had no special access to her famous son, sometimes failed to understand the nature of his mission (e.g., 2:48-50), and never helped someone obtain some favor from Jesus that he or she could not otherwise obtain. Indeed, the unanimous testimony of Scripture is that people should come to Jesus: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28), Jesus says—not, “Come to my mother.” He alone is the true mediator between God and human beings.

Nevertheless, Mary is wholly admirable, a model of many virtues (as is also, e.g., Joseph in Gen. 37—50). She accepts her astonishing role with submissiveness and equanimity, considering what it must have initially done to her reputation (1:34-38). Elizabeth twice calls her “blessed” (1:42, 45), i.e., approved by God; the supernatural recognition of the superiority of Mary’s Son over Elizabeth’s son (1:41-45) was doubtless one of the things that Mary pondered in her heart (2:19). But none of this goes to Mary’s head: she herself recognizes that her “blessedness” is not based on intrinsic superiority, but on God’s (the “Mighty One’s”) mindfulness of her “humble state” and his choice to do “great things” for her (1:48-49). Her focus in the *Magnificat*, as ours must be, is on the faithfulness of God in bringing about the deliverance so long promised (1:50-55).

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BEFORE WE MEET:

1. In the past week what did you learn about God from what you read?
2. In the past week what did you learn about people from what you read?
3. In the past week what is one question you have from what you read?

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 Genesis 49; Luke 2; Job 15; 1 Corinthians 3
 

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JESUS GREW UP A THOROUGHLY Jewish boy. Not only was his lineage Jewish, it was Davidic: legally, he belonged to the suppressed royal house (Luke 2:4). Imperial politics were divinely manipulated to ensure that Jesus would be born in the ancient town of David (2:1-4, 11). On the eighth day of his life, he was circumcised (2:21). At the appropriate time, Mary and Joseph offered a sacrifice in keeping with the Law's prescription of what was required of every firstborn male (2:22-24). "Joseph and Mary," we are told, did "everything required by the Law of the Lord" (2:39). In the first days of Jesus' life, Simeon prophetically addressed God in prayer, declaring that the coming of Jesus was "for glory to your people Israel" (2:32); aged Anna "gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem" (2:38). Every year, Joseph and Mary traveled the long miles from Nazareth to Jerusalem to participate in the Feast of Passover, "according to the custom" (2:41-42), joining tens of thousands of other pilgrims; and of course, Jesus went along, witnessed the slaughter of thousands of Passover lambs, heard the temple choirs, and recited the ancient Scriptures. At the age of twelve, Jesus' constant exposure to the heritage of his people and the content of their Scriptures led to the extraordinary exchanges he enjoyed with the temple teachers (2:41-52).

We cannot begin to grasp the categories in which Jesus spoke and acted, the categories in which his life and ministry, his death and resurrection, have significance, unless we find them in the ancient Hebrew Bible.

Yet that is not all there is to say. That same Bible does not *begin* with Abraham and the origins of the Israelites. It begins with God, the origin of the universe, the creation of human beings bearing God's image, the wretched rebellion of the Fall, the first cycles of judgment and forgiveness, the first promises of redemption to come. Certainly Paul understood that the Bible's long story of the Jews must be set *within* the still longer story of the human race, and that even the first calling of the man who is the ancestor of all Jews specifies that through him all the nations of the earth will be blessed (Gal. 3; cf. Gen. 12). Here at the beginning of Jesus' life, the same framework peeps through. Simeon praises the Sovereign Lord for allowing him to live to see this baby: "For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of *all people*, a light for revelation *to the Gentiles* and for glory to your people Israel" (2:31-32).

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Genesis 50; Luke 3; Job 16—17; 1 Corinthians 4



THE LAST CHAPTER OF GENESIS includes a section that is both pathetic and glorious (Gen. 50:15-21).

Everything that is sad and flawed in this family resurfaces when Jacob dies. Joseph's brothers fear that their illustrious sibling may have suppressed vengeful resentment only until the death of the old man. Why did they think like this? Was it because they were still lashed with guilt feelings? Were they merely projecting onto Joseph what they would have done had they been in his place?

Their strategy involves them in fresh sin: they lie about what their father said, in the hope that an appeal from Jacob would at least tug at Joseph's heartstrings. In this light, their abject submission ("We are your slaves," 50:18) sounds less like loyal homage than desperate manipulation.

By contrast, Joseph weeps (50:17). He cannot help but see that these groveling lies betray how little he is loved or trusted, even after seventeen years (47:28) of nominal reconciliation. His verbal response displays not only pastoral gentleness—"he reassured them and spoke kindly to them," promising to provide for them and their families (50:21)—it also reflects a man who has thought deeply about the mysteries of providence, about God's sovereignty and human responsibility. "Don't be afraid," he tells them. "Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (50:19-20).

The profundity of this reasoning comes into focus as we reflect on what Joseph does *not* say. He does not say that during a momentary lapse on God's part, Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, but that God, being a superb chess player, turned the game around and in due course made Joseph prime minister of Egypt. Still less does he say that God's intention had been to send Joseph down to Egypt in a well-appointed chariot, but unfortunately Joseph's brothers rather mucked up the divine plan, forcing God to respond with clever countermoves to bring about his own good purposes. Rather, *in the one event*—the selling of Joseph into slavery—there were two parties, and two quite different intentions. On the one hand, Joseph's brothers acted, and their intentions were evil; on the other, God acted, and his intentions were good. Both acted to bring about this event, but while the evil in it must be traced back to the brothers and no farther, the good in it must be traced to God.

This is a common stance in Scripture. It generates many complex, philosophical discussions. But the basic notion is simple. God is sovereign, and invariably good; we are morally responsible, and frequently evil.

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