

Adam Clarke:

Introduction

Joseph commands his steward to put his cup secretly into Benjamin's sack, Genesis 44:1, Genesis 44:2. The sons of Jacob depart with the corn they had purchased, Genesis 44:3. Joseph commands his steward to pursue them, and charge them with having stolen his cup, Genesis 44:4-6. The brethren excuse themselves, protest their innocence, and offer to submit to be slaves should the cup be found with any of them, Genesis 44:7-9. Search is made, and the cup is found in Benjamin's sack, Genesis 44:10-12. They are brought back and submit themselves to Joseph, Genesis 44:13-16. He determines that Benjamin alone, with whom the cup is found, shall remain in captivity, Genesis 44:17. Judah, in a most affecting speech, pleads for Benjamin's enlargement, and offers himself to be a bondman in his stead, vv. 18-34.

Verse 2

Put my cup in the sack's mouth of the youngest - The stratagem of the cup seems to have been designed to bring Joseph's brethren into the highest state of perplexity and distress, that their deliverance by the discovery that Joseph was their brother might have its highest effect.

Verse 5

Whereby - he divineth? - Divination by cups has been from time immemorial prevalent among the Asiatics; and for want of knowing this, commentators have spent a profusion of learned labor upon these words, in order to reduce them to that kind of meaning which would at once be consistent with the scope and design of the history, and save Joseph from the impeachment of sorcery and divination. I take the word נַחֲשׁ (nachash) here in its general acceptation of to view attentively, to inquire. Now there has been in the east a tradition, the commencement of which is lost in immemorial time, that there was a Cup, which had passed successively into the hands of different potentates, which possessed the strange property of representing in it the whole world, and all the things which were then doing in it. The cup is called (jami Jemsheed), the cup of Jemsheed, a very ancient king of Persia, whom late historians and poets have confounded with Bacchus, Solomon, Alexander the Great, etc. This Cup, filled with the elixir of immortality, they say was discovered when digging to lay the foundations of Persepolis. The Persian poets are full of allusions to this cup, which, from its property of representing the whole world and its transactions, is styled by them (jam جهان نیا), the cup showing the universe; and to the intelligence received by means of it they attribute the great prosperity of their ancient monarchs, as by it they understood all events, past, present, and to come. Many of the Mohammedan princes and governors affect still to have information of futurity by means of a cup. When Mr. Norden was at Derri in the farthest part of Egypt, in a very dangerous situation, an ill-natured and powerful Arab, in a threatening way, told one of their people whom they sent to him that he knew what sort of people they were, for he had consulted his cup, and found by it that they were those of whom one of their prophets had said, that Franks (Europeans) would come in disguise; and, passing everywhere, examine the state of the country; and afterwards bring over a great number of other Franks, conquer the country, and exterminate all. By this we see that the tradition of the divining cup still exists, and in the very same country too in which Joseph formerly ruled. Now though it is not at all likely that Joseph practiced any kind of divination, yet probably, according to the superstition of those times, (for I suppose the tradition to be even older than the time of Joseph), supernatural influence might be attributed to his cup; and as the whole transaction related here was merely intended to deceive his brethren for a short time, he might as well affect divination by his cup, as he affected to believe they had stolen it. The steward therefore uses the word נַחֲשׁ (nachash) in its proper meaning: Is not this it out of which my lord drinketh, and in which he inspecteth accurately? Genesis 44:5. And hence Joseph says, Genesis 44:15: Wot ye not - did ye not know, that such a person as I (having such a cup) would accurately and attentively look into it? As I consider this to be the true meaning, I shall not trouble the reader with other modes of interpretation.

Verse 16

What shall we say, etc. - No words can more strongly mark confusion and perturbation of mind. They, no doubt, all thought that Benjamin had actually stolen the cup; and the probability of this guilt might be heightened by the circumstance of his having that very cup to drink out of at dinner; for as he had the most honorable mess, so it is likely he had the most honorable cup to drink out of at the entertainment.

Verse 18

Thou art even as Pharaoh - As wise, as powerful, and as much to be dreaded as he. In the Asiatic countries, the reigning monarch is always considered to be the pattern of all perfection; and the highest honor that can be conferred on any person, is to resemble him to the monarch; as the monarch himself is likened, in the same complimentary way, to an angel of God. See 2 Samuel 14:17, 2 Samuel 14:18. Judah is the chief speaker here, because it was in consequence of his becoming surety for Benjamin that Jacob permitted him to accompany

them to Egypt. See Genesis 43:9.

“Every man who reads,” says Dr. Dodd, “to the close of this chapter, must confess that Judah acts here the part both of the affectionate brother and of the dutiful son, who, rather than behold his father’s misery in ease of Benjamin’s being left behind, submits to become a bondman in his stead: and indeed there is such an air of candor and generosity running through the whole strain of this speech, the sentiments are so tender and affecting, the expressions so passionate, and flow so much from artless nature, that it is no wonder if they came home to Joseph’s heart, and forced him to throw off the mask.” “When one sees,” says Dr. Jackson, “such passages related by men who affect no art, and who lived long after the parties who first uttered them, we cannot conceive how all particulars could be so naturally and fully recorded, unless they had been suggested by His Spirit who gives mouths and speech unto men; who, being alike present to all successions, is able to communicate the secret thoughts or forefathers to their children, and put the very words of the deceased, never registered before, into the mouths or pens of their successors born many ages after; and that as exactly and distinctly as if they had been caught, in characters of steel or brass, as they issued out of their mouths. For it is plain that every circumstance is here related with such natural specifications, as if Moses had heard them talk; and therefore could not have been thus represented to us, unless they had been written by His direction who knows all things, fore-past, present, or to come.”

To two such able and accurate testimonies I may be permitted to add my own. No paraphrase can heighten the effect of Judah’s address to Joseph. To add would be to diminish its excellence; to attempt to explain would be to obscure its beauties; to clothe the ideas in other language than that of Judah, and his translators in our Bible, would ruin its energy, and destroy its influence. It is perhaps one of the most tender, affecting pieces of natural oratory ever spoken or penned; and we need not wonder to find that when Joseph heard it he could not refrain himself, but wept aloud. His soul must have been insensible beyond what is common to human nature, had he not immediately yielded to a speech so delicately tender, and so powerfully impressive. We cannot but deplore the unnatural and unscientific division of the narrative in our common Bibles, which obliges us to have recourse to another chapter in order to witness the effects which this speech produced on the heart of Joseph.